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Oversummoned, Overpowered, AND OVER IT.

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Prologue

Today should have been like any other day, but it wasn't. Out of nowhere, a pale blue light appeared on the floor in the classroom during our break, forming what looked like a summoning circle, and before I knew it, the room was enveloped in a blinding white light.

When I came to, I realized that I was standing in a blank, white space that stretched as far as the eye could see.

"Wh-What happened?!"

"Aghh!"

"Where are we?!"

The air was filled with the frantic screams of my classmates as they reacted to this incomprehensible situation. Well, I call them "classmates," but truthfully, I'd barely ever talked to any of them. I didn't even know most of their names.

But that was the least of my worries right now. Sure, I wasn't as outwardly freaked out as they were, but in terms of cluelessness, we were all in the same boat. If I had to take a stab in the dark though, I had a good idea of what was going to happen next. Just going off of precedent, since we were in an empty, white space like this, then...

"Be at ease."

Yep, called it. Just as expected, a beautiful woman exuding elegance and grace wrapped in a pure white raiment appeared before us. She was very well endowed in both her looks as well as her figure, and the halo of light surrounding her caressed her pale skin hypnotizingly. In short, she was super hot. As proof of that, all the people who had been screaming and shouting just a minute ago were now either dumbfounded or blushing—even the girls were enthralled.

Okay, yeah, my eyes were glued to her too. So what? She has a good face and a good body. If she wore something a little less revealing, she'd be just my type. When it comes to boobs, a little modesty goes a long way.

"I am what you would call a goddess. You are currently in the space between worlds." Her voice sounded dignified and as if it came from the very heavens themselves, making my classmates gasp.

Some of them even blushed and averted their gazes. *Okay, yeah, my eyes were* still *glued to her. So what?*

"Allow me to explain your current situation. You have been summoned to be heroes and tasked with defeating a demon lord. As such, your souls will be transported to Haigen Kingdom in the world of swords and sorcery, Beluze."

"Summoned to be heroes...?" These words fell out of the mouth of one of my classmates before the space was once again filled with silence.

"Can we... Are we allowed to ask a few questions?" our class representative asked, raising her hand.

Wait, was she really raising her hand? *We're not in school anymore, you know. What are you raising your hand for?* Guess she was a really earnest person. Anyway, while even being able to ask a question in this situation was praiseworthy, the goddess only shook her head slowly with a mournful expression.

"This is but a passageway for souls. The time afforded to you in this space is short. Ten seconds is all that remains before you are transported to Beluze. As such, I haven't the time to answer your questions."

"Oh… I see."

"However, first, I will bestow each of you with a Gift—a special power appropriate for the world you are summoned to. However, I advise you all not to allow yourselves to be consumed by this power, and to guide the people always, never straying from the path of righteousness. I pray that your futures are bright."

Then, engulfed by a white light, we were transported to our new world.

"I-I have succeeded…" an unknown voice said through ragged breaths.

When my sight returned to me, I saw that we were now in the middle of a very large room, not too different from the size of an auditorium or a gymnasium. It was seriously huge, and the interior design reminded me of the Middle Ages in Europe. It was apparent from the marble pillars and such that it was expensively and carefully decorated.

The other thing I noticed was a young girl who seemed to be out of breath. She was wearing a blue ritualistic garb that didn't exactly hide the sweat dripping off of her pale skin.

"It was a success."

"We've done it!"

"Heroes!"

"Our saviors!"

The people around us were abuzz with excitement. From their extravagant clothing, I could tell that they were most likely nobles—maybe royal advisors? Apart from them, I also glimpsed a group of people wearing armor. At the very least, it would be safe to say that this wasn't a normal sight in modern society. My classmates were apparently of the same opinion because they had become extremely guarded.

Come on, guys, this is obviously an isekai—you know, that thing that's all the rage nowadays where people are sent to different worlds? None of them seemed excited about this at all, though. What? So this ain't your first rodeo or something?

"Silence," said a large man with a great beard who looked as though he were in his forties. He spoke in a low but powerful voice, leading the rest of the nobles to shut their mouths.

Judging by the way he was standing in front of the throne, I had a strong suspicion that he was the king.

"Well met, heroes. I am the monarch of Haigen Kingdom, Lizen Haigen."

Yep, called it.

“Heroes, Haigen Kingdom welcomes you with open arms. We ask that you aid us in defeating the demon king—the scourge that has run rampant across our lands.”

As soon as he knelt, everyone else in the room did as well. *Wow, they really respect us.*

“King Lizen, please raise your head. May I be allowed a question?” our class representative asked.

“Yes. You may speak.”

“Will we be able to return to our original world, Earth?”

It made perfect sense that this was the first question asked. And of course, the answer was...

“Indeed, you will.”

Wait, what?! We can? Oh, okay.

“Direct any further questions to our holy woman here who oversaw your summoning,” the king said, instructing the woman dressed in the ritual garb from before to approach us.

She was definitely another looker. She had a slim figure and a cute face, which stood in contrast to the mature look of the goddess.

“I am the holy woman of Haigen Kingdom, Luishia. Returning you to the place from whence you came poses no difficulty. However, I am unable to do so immediately. It will be possible in one month’s time, during the next full moon. Those who do not wish to aid us in defeating the demon king may wait within the castle until that day.”

Nice. Isekai tourism.

“When we’re sent back, will a month have passed in our world as well?” Our class representative posed her next question.

“No. You will return to the point in time that you were summoned. No time will have passed in your world.”

Well, isn’t that just perfect? A little too convenient, even, if you ask me.

“Are there any among you who wish to return to your world? We will not stop any of you from doing so, even if it would mean that none of you remain here. However, I beg you all to heed our call. Bring salvation to our world!” At these words, the holy woman burst into tears.

Usually, this would have been the part where a self-proclaimed hero stepped up to the plate and rallied the rest of our classmates to stay and help. Unfortunately, the silence was deafening.

“I must apologize, but I think I speak for everyone when I say that this is too big of a decision to be made on the spot like this. Would it be okay if we used this month to think it over?” another one of my classmates said.

Wow, that’s pretty levelheaded... I think I’m down with that course of action.

“I understand. In that case, we ask that you participate in some training on a provisional basis. Our knight commander will provide further instructions.”

At that point, a brown-haired man with a full mustache and an intimidating face emerged from the group of tough-looking warriors. “Thank you for the introduction. Hail, heroes. I am the knight commander, Lugario. As for the specifics of the training, those will have to wait until we actually begin. First, I must determine your abilities.”

“Our abilities?” the class representative asked.

“Correct. Either speak or think the word ‘status,’” he instructed us.

Oh, so that’s the kind of world we’re in.

“Status,” I said. This whispered word opened a window that showed me all sorts of different information.

```
Inori Takafuji / Race: Human / Lv. 1
HP: 105 / MP: 103 / STR: 105
VIT: 96 / DEX: 110 / AGI: 121 / INT: 106
Divine Blessing(s): [Growth Boost] [5x Exp Multiplier] [½
Required Exp]
```

“It seems that you have the status of an average man of age,” the knight commander observed.

“All of my stats are average?”

“Indeed.”

The knight commander followed up by saying that heroes don’t start off with ridiculous stats. Judging by the reactions of everyone else, it seemed like they all had average stats too. I had kinda hoped that everyone else but me would have special stats, but I guess that hadn’t happened.

“You may have noticed you all have something called ‘Divine Blessings.’ These are gifts from the goddess for heroes like yourselves who travel to different worlds.”

To start with, it seemed like we had all been given the Growth Boost gift, befitting of fledgling heroes who were looking to develop themselves. In addition to that, we all had two unique gifts. The rest of my class had imbalanced gifts like “Imagination Magic,” “Limit Breaker,” or “Barrier”—a perfect fit for cheaters. In contrast, mine were all focused on experience growth.

My stats may not have been “hero-level,” but my gifts seemed very hero-esque. It was typical for classes like alchemists or thieves to pick up hidden skills later on that would make them even stronger.

After everyone finished looking over their statuses, the king’s voice boomed out across the room once more. “Very well, heroes. You may take this month to decide whether or not you are willing to lend us your aid. However…tonight, we celebrate! Indulge yourselves in food and drink!”

Wow, they really left nothing to be desired. *Hm, I* am *pretty curious about what the food of this world tastes like.* Would it be extremely epicurean—or paltry, thanks to an underdeveloped society? Think I’d much prefer the former.

Suddenly, a blue light appeared under my feet in the shape of a magic circle, just like the one from when we had been in the classroom. *Oh, cool, they're teleporting us to the banquet hall?* In my mind, I had imagined that it would be rare for teleportation magic to be used, but it seemed that in this world, that wasn't the case. I guess it shouldn't have surprised me, since they had been able to summon all of us here. Obviously, summoning people from different worlds was a much more difficult feat than transporting people across a single world. If they could teleport things this easily, though, did that also mean they were able to collect different ingredients from all over the world?

My mouth was watering. I couldn't wait to try all the food a fantasy world had to offer...

"W-Whoa, Takafuji..." A guy next to me called out.

I thought it was strange that he was trying to strike up a conversation with me, since I'd never spoken to him before, so I turned to face him. That's when I saw his look of surprise as he pointed at my feet. *What? Scared of teleportation magic even after you've just been summoned from a different world? There's nothing to be scared of...*

"Huh?"

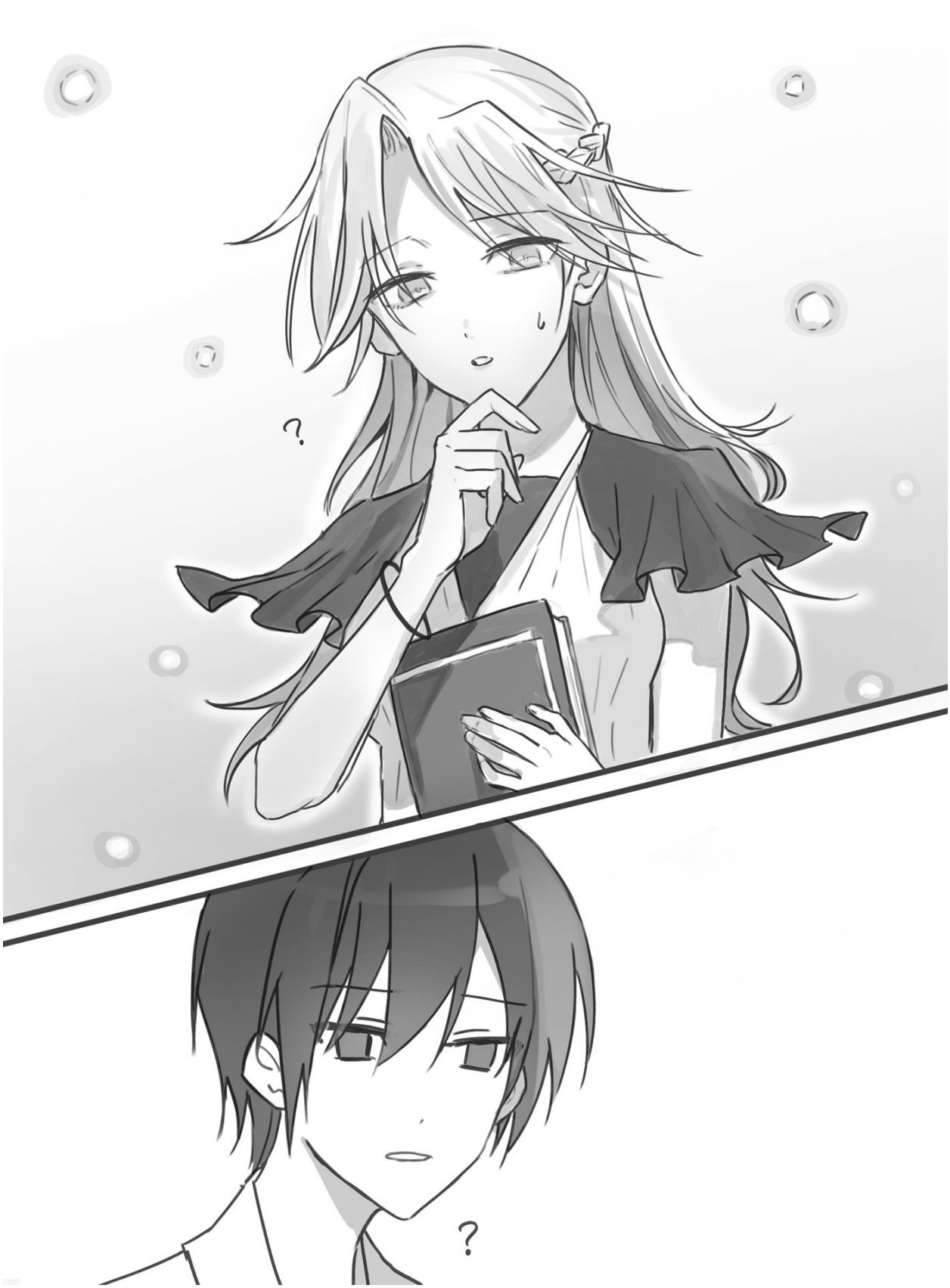
By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. I was the only person who had a magic circle beneath their feet. Just me, and no one else.

"What's going on?"

While I didn't have a single clue what was happening, a bright yellow light filled my vision.

When I opened my eyes, I was in a blank, white space that stretched as far as the eye could see. *Okay, this is some serious déjà vu.*

"Greetings. I am what you would call a goddess. You are currently in the space between worlds. Allow me to explain your current situation... Oh?"



Oh, hello, Goddess. It's been a whole, what, ten minutes since we last met?

"Weren't you *just* here?" said the goddess, dropping her refined act all at once.

"Uh, yeah. You mind filling me in on what's happening? In ten words or less, please."

In the meantime, I was in a state of complete confusion. *Huh? What? What's gonna happen to me now? Am I gonna die?*

"Sorry," said the goddess, "I don't have a clue."

"Am I getting summoned again or something?"

"Most likely. For the time being, the rules say I need to give you another gift. I don't know what's going on, but... Good luck!"

You're just gonna say "good luck" and ship me off again?! Before I could say anything, though, a flash of yellow light once again filled my vision.

"Ah, the summoning was a success."

"Indeed. Let's name this one 'Guinea Pig Number Twelve.'"

The magic circle was still shining under my feet. *Now that I think about it, the magic circle back in Haigen was a pale blue, but this one's yellow.* That was the least of my worries right now, though, because being dubbed a "guinea pig" gave me a pretty bad feeling.

"Luigi, use your Eye of Constriction on him just in case he has an offensive-type Magic Eye."

Wait, "Luigi"? As in the green little brother of that guy with the mustache? *Okay, I seriously need to stop getting distracted.*

The mustacheless man named Luigi had the appearance of a knight. He walked up to me and shot me a piercing glare, and as I noticed a flash in his eye, I felt my body go numb.

"Restrain him too, just in case."

The stern-looking guy standing before me ordered the others around me to shackle me with iron chains around my wrists, ankles, and neck. I couldn't have resisted even if I wanted to. Some kind of magical power held me back.

"Mwa ha ha," a man laughed maniacally. "Well done, Luigi."

"Yes, Professor."

"At last, we can resume our experiments." The first man let out another maniacal laugh.

This guy really gave me a bad feeling. The man named Luigi had called him "Professor," and he certainly looked the part—with a thin body draped in a white coat, and a monocle. He was, without a doubt, a mad scientist. Now that I had a chance to calmly look around, I could tell that I wasn't in the best of situations. *If I could* not *be summoned right into the lion's den next time, that'd be just great.* Man, Haigen Kingdom was heaven compared to this.

Once again, the professor laughed maniacally. “Welcome to our world, boy.”

I really hated the way he was smiling at me, and it didn’t help that he was getting all up in my face either. *Get away from me! Your nose is about to touch me, you creep!*

“You’re surprisingly calm…or maybe it’s that your brain simply hasn’t processed the situation you’re in? Or maybe you’re frozen with fear? Or *maybe,* your mind has already fled your body?”

I had no choice but to listen to this creep drone on. I couldn’t answer him even if I wanted to, since the numbness in my body apparently extended to my mouth as well. The most I could do was make my lips tremble. Since there was nothing else I could do anyway, I decided to let out a sigh.

“Hm? Giving up? Clever boy!”

Like I really had any other choice. Fighting back would just be a waste of energy—of course it was smarter to give up! But what *could* I do right now? It would’ve been awesome if someone barged in to save me, if this whole place collapsed, or anything else happened to thwart their plans. I needed to prepare myself for any of those situations playing out.

Of course, there was also the chance that none of that would happen. In that case, I needed to just stay calm.

“I can tell from your eyes that you’re a fighter! Quite the interesting boy. I’m so excited to perform experiments on you!” His maniacal laughter filled my ears.

That’s a hard pass from me. Why summon someone just to perform tests on them?

“I will be conducting experiments on your Magic Eye,” he continued. It was as if he’d read my mind. “Those who come here from other worlds arrive with a Magic Eye—there are no exceptions! It is my hypothesis that they receive their Magic Eye as they travel between worlds, and it is my duty to perform experiments on these individuals.”

Oh, I see. The Magic Eye he’s talking about must’ve been the Gift I received this time.

“Professor, begin the experiment. We, the Knights of Maran, have been instructed by the king to follow your orders for this experiment, but we’ve no intention of staying to listen to your idle chatter.”

“How rude of me,” said the professor. “I was thinking about how he’d make a good gift to the underworld…but I guess he won’t be going there for a *long* time.”

From the way he said that, I could infer that I was going to be kept alive for a while. In that case, during that period of time, maybe someone would come and save me. But then again, if this was all approved by the king, this experiment might be conducted with public acceptance. Didn’t look like I was going to be saved by these knights anytime soon either. *Hm…do I have any chance of being rescued at all?*

After he finished speaking with the stern-looking man, who was presumably the knight commander, the creepy guy looked back at me and held his hand up.

"It'd be most problematic if you were to flail around or lose your mind during all of this, so I shall hypnotize you. Mwa ha ha." As he said this, a yellow magic circle appeared before his hand, and suddenly I felt as if a fog were creeping into my brain.

The world became hazy, and everything started to feel distant. It must have been a type of hypnosis spell that interfered with one's mind—no, this had to have been a subjugation spell.

It was trying to compel me to obey his orders. The feeling of this was absolutely disgusting. As the fog continued to creep into my mind, however, I forcefully expelled it, casting aside his commands. I shot him a hateful glare. *I'm not as helpless as you think.*

The smile vanished from the creep's face, replaced by confusion. "Strange. It's not working... It's not working at all. This is a high-level spell, though..."

Huh? That spell was "high-level"? I guess I can be proud that I resisted it, then.

"Hm... Is it because of this Magic Eye? Strange. Luigi's Eye of Constriction should have sealed any offensive capabilities. Maybe you resisted that as well?"

"No, Professor. My Magic Eye is working properly."

"Then perhaps he has some kind of resistance to mental interference. Mario, investigate him with your Eye of Appraisal."

Wait, Mario? As in Luigi's big brother? Were their parents gamers or something? That had to be a coincidence. No way they knew about video game characters from our world.

Mario looked at me. "Both his physical and magical stats are that of a layman. He doesn't seem to possess any special abilities."

Wait, what? Where did my gift from Haigen go? Can the people of this world not perceive it? Or was it replaced by my new gift?

"However, he has two Magic Eyes. The Eye of True Sight in his right, and the Eye of Sigils in his left."

"*Two* Magic Eyes?! Mwa ha ha! Ah yes, now that I look at it, his left eye is indeed a different color."

Huh? Aren't both of my eyes black? They're different colors now? I felt like I was trapped in some geeky middle schooler's delusion. It was really going to make me stand out.

"So, what powers do these eyes possess?"

"The Eye of True Sight is similar to my Eye of Appraisal, but perhaps even stronger. In addition to the ability of appraisal, it is all-seeing, is able to identify objects in motion, and bestows a photographic memory upon the one who possesses it. Put simply, it specializes in enhancing vision."

Wow. I gotta say, that sounded so overpowered.

“Mwa ha ha, most excellent! And what about his left eye?”

“The Eye of Sigils allows him to store any magic circle he sees within it and allows him to later activate its ability at a time of his choosing. It would seem that he can only store one at a time, but he can replace whatever he has stored with a new one. When the spell is activated, its effects occur immediately with no mana cost.”

Holy crap, that’s so convenient! I’m so glad I got this power. And it’d be even better if I wasn’t restrained like this.

“Mwa ha ha, most excellent! I’m so excited to begin experimenting on him! And do you know how he’s been able to resist my hypnosis?”

“Unfortunately, no. My hypothesis, however hard it is to believe, is that he simply possesses a will that exceeds the powers of compulsion of even a high-level hypnosis spell.”

“Hm. Well, luckily, this doesn’t affect the experiment whatsoever! If he has such a strong will, then I’m sure his mind won’t break. Mwa ha ha! Now then—bring him to the laboratory!”

Though I tried to resist, I couldn’t. The two knights picked me up from either side, forcefully stood me on my feet, and dragged me along with them towards a dark room. When we reached our destination, I saw a table with restraints in the middle of the room, where I had a full view of all the fun drugs and tools they had lined up for me. Hooray!

Honestly, I didn’t have a particularly good feeling about their human experiments. If I had to guess, it was gonna be pretty close to torture. *Is this where you’re going to experiment on me? Ohhh nooo, I’m afwaid of needles.*

“Mwa ha ha! Now put him on the table! It’s time to start the experiment! Mwa ha ha!!!”

This was seriously, seriously bad. Something needed to happen, and fast. *Hey, any chance something could conveniently just explode and kill him?* Just as I had that thought, a green light began to glow underneath me. Needless to say, this was rather unexpected, and everyone in the room, including me, froze in shock.

The green light expanded and formed a magic circle. *Oh, hey. Déjà vu.* Then, in the next second, a blinding light filled my vision.

“Huh? You’re back for a *third* time? You in love with me or something?”

Nope. Not like I came here of my own will. I do kinda like you, though.

I’d been transported back to the familiar world of white in which the goddess resided. *Man, just how many times am I going to be summoned?* How had this once-in-a-lifetime event happened three times already?! I *was*, however, thankful for it, because it had really saved my ass. *Screw you, creepy guy.*

“Hello, Goddess. So, any idea what’s going on?”

“Hmm… This is the first time that something this weird has happened. I’ll need to do some research. If we meet again, I’ll tell you what I learned, okay?”

She wasn’t even trying to talk like a goddess anymore. Also, why was I trying to cozy up to her, anyway? Well, at this rate, I was pretty sure I’d actually meet her again. I mean, third time’s the charm, right? *Though hopefully it stops there.*

A green light enveloped me, and once again, I was sent off to a new world.

“T-Teacher, what do you think?”

“Yes. The summoning was a success.”

Given that this was my third go-round, nothing about this situation surprised me anymore. Kinda scary how used to it I’ve become… Hm? Wait, I don’t think I was that surprised the first time either.

Before me stood a young girl, out of breath, and a tall, bespectacled woman with brown hair. The younger girl had probably been the one who summoned me. Now that I could get a better look at her, I saw that she was beautiful. She had blonde hair that fell into curls, an elegant dress that made it clear she was a noble, and large, stunning blue eyes.

The girl had called the slender, brown-haired woman “teacher,” which made it natural for me to assume that she was the girl’s instructor. She had the figure of a model, sharp eyes, and…long ears. An elf, perhaps?

Meanwhile, the magic circle that I’d become so familiar with was beneath my feet.

“Magnificent. You have summoned a humanoid monster on your first try. You are truly gifted, Lady Liede.”

Something about what the teacher had said bothered me. “Monster”? Who are you talking about, again?

“Is he truly a monster? He looks like a human to me.”

I am indeed a human, yes.

“He possesses the magical energy specific to monsters. As an elf, I am able to distinguish between the different magic signatures of beings.”

Oh, so she really was an elf. But there was something wrong, because I was unmistakably human. I felt basically as offended as if she were saying I was as stinky as a monster.

“What manner of monster is he?”

“Please allow me to correct myself. He is a demon, not a monster. Judging by his mana levels, he is a Baron-Class vampire.”

Vampire? As in the ones who suck blood? Sorry to disappoint, but I’ve been a human all my life.

“The signature sharp fangs in his mouth should be proof enough of that,” she went on.

At the mention of this, I reached up and felt around inside my mouth…and sure enough, I had fangs. Looking again at the two women in

front of me, a sudden hunger came over me. Or was this thirst? Was I starved or parched? I couldn't really tell, but at any rate, that's what I was experiencing. The blonde girl looked *especially* tasty. Maybe it was her virgin's blood. *Hey, wait a second. First I switched classes, then I almost got tortured, and now I've switched races too?*

"A demon? Can he converse with us?"

"Despite demons possessing a high level of intelligence, mutual conversation is only possible for those in the highest echelons."

"Uh, I can talk."

"D-D-Did he just speak?!" the teacher screamed.

Look, the reason I've been quiet this whole time isn't because I can't talk, but because I was just listening, okay?

"Oh, he really did. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Liediana Liede. Please, call me Liede."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Inori."

"H-His speech is so fluent! Could he be a Count-Class vampire? But his mana levels are not nearly high enough. Plus, he's *named*... Just what is he?" the teacher muttered, as Liede and I exchanged greetings.

Is it that rare for vampires to have names here? Huh. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything.

"Would you mind explaining what you meant by Baron-Class and Count-Class?" Liede asked her teacher.

"Hm, but if that was the case... A-Ah, y-yes! The demon hierarchy has many different levels. Unlike the system used by human nobility, these levels are instead an index of their strength. For demons, strength determines their status in society."

Dude, the world of demons sounded way too simple. Not to mention, if most of them couldn't even talk, then I had no clue how their society even functioned.

"Thank you for the explanation. I understand now," said the girl. "What should I do next?"

"Oh, my apologies, Lady Liede. I should have explained this earlier. You will need to make him your familiar by using a contract."

Wait, I'm gonna be her familiar? Well, she seems like a really good, purehearted person, so I guess I can trust her. On the other hand, I don't think I can accept being someone's servant. Not because of pride or anything like that, but because I'm severely self-serving. Me being the person I am, I don't think I could stand being anyone else's possession. Becoming a "thing" that belonged to her was not acceptable to me. However, trying to run away in this foreign land was probably not the greatest idea either.

Apparently, all I had to do for the contract was have her drink my blood. As such, the elven teacher took my hand and moved a needle to my finger to prick it. *Ugh, guess there's nothing I can really do...* At the very least, I figured I should be happy that I was alive. I would've loved to escape being

her familiar, but staying alive was my top priority. *Besides, this is a million times better than waking up in a new world just to be tortured. I can handle this. After I get a better handle on my abilities, I can probably kill her and escape servitude anyway.*

Just as I had begun to prepare myself for what awaited me in my future life, another magic circle appeared underneath me. This time, it was red, completely different from any of the other summoning circles I'd seen until now.

The two of them were stunned by this sudden development, but I already knew what was about to happen.

"Uh... Sorry," I muttered with a grimace, before my body was enveloped in a red light and I disappeared from their world.

"Hey, guess who's back?"

"Looks like someone's enjoying himself. Also, when did you stop being human?"

Indeed, I was back in the goddess's blank world, and just like ten minutes ago, the goddess was yet again standing before me. *Hey, is that a new outfit?*

"Yes, I just changed."

Huh? I didn't say that out loud, did I? That must mean that she can read minds.

"Precisely."

"Why'd you change?" I asked, eyeing her new outfit, which was a stark contrast to the rather exhibitionist dress she had worn before. The thin, tight, beige dress she was wearing now covered her breasts completely, which was even more alluring.

"Because you said that when it comes to boobs, a little modesty goes a long way."

She was reading my mind back then?! So does that mean she heard my compliments too?!

"Embarrassed?"

"Not really. Those were my true, unfiltered opinions, after all."

"Oh, I'm impressed. Hm, maybe that's why I... Well, anyway—what do you think? Do I look good in this?"

In response, I smiled and gave her a thumbs-up.

"Heh heh." A triumphant look surfaced on her face.

She's cute. She's really cute.

"So, did you figure out what's going on?" I asked her.

"I have a guess, yes."

"What are you thinking?"

"There's not much time, so I'll keep it short. It takes a strong soul to be able to cross worlds, which is why summoning only selects those with strong souls. I believe you have an abnormally strong soul."

"And that's why I keep getting summoned?"

“If you enter a hero’s contract or something similar, it will fix your soul into the world in which you signed the contract.”

Makes sense. But do I really have that strong of a soul? I wouldn’t consider myself a saint, a good person, or anything in between.

“Your personal ethics are irrelevant. The strength of your soul is related to the strength of your ego. Oh—it looks like time’s up.”

And as she said that, my body was enveloped in a red light.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah—wait, ‘later’?”

“Yep. There are still four other worlds that have summoned you.”

Seriously? But before I could even express my surprise, I disappeared from the goddess’s world.

“For humans, having a strong soul is not necessarily a good thing,” the goddess murmured once I was gone.

“Hail, hero! Welcome to our world! I am the first princess of Sarfia Kingdom, Canna Sarfia. Please lend us your aid in saving our kingdom!”

All right, here we go again. For the fourth time too. And this time, it was night.

“Oh, you need my aid?”

“Yes! The demon king—”

“Well, let’s just set that aside for now.”

“Huh?” The princess stared at me in surprise.

She had short, light-blue hair, with eyes to match. She was a very cute girl, but this was not the time for me to be ogling her.

“If I’m the hero, I’ve gotta have, like, some kinda special ability, right?”

“Y-Yes, that is correct.”

“Watch how you speak to the princess, knave!” barked a man who looked like he was part of the imperial knights or something.

I couldn’t have cared less, though—I didn’t have the time to choose my words carefully. I was on a timer.

“Is there a way to see what ability I received?”

“Y-Yes. You need but touch this gem.”

“You dare ignore me, knave?! You—” The man screamed at me again, but I didn’t understand why. It wasn’t like the princess was making a big deal out of this or anything. *You’re supposed to be protecting us while we talk, not interrupting. Do your damn job!*

I touched the gem, and some letters surfaced on it, spelling out the words: “Gift: Skill Pilfer. You have a fixed chance to steal a Skill from your target by touching them.”

“A ‘Skill’?” I asked.

“I’ve never seen an ability like this before!” The princess seemed surprised by my Skill, but that wasn’t important to me right now.

“So this world has ‘Skills’?”

“Yes. Do they not exist in your world?”

“Nope. So, if you wouldn’t mind explaining…”

“You impudent little—”

“Shut up!” The guard had gotten on my last nerve, so I hit him to shut him up.

To my surprise, one hit from me, a complete amateur, was enough to knock him out. *And you call yourself an imperial guard?!*

“Um, well, a Skill is a fixed action that one can obtain after they have risen to a high enough level of proficiency. Each comes with its own buff that either increases the efficacy or volatility of the user’s action. The strength of the Skill rises with the level of its user.”

Okay. So I understand that it’s a strong power, but can I use it in other worlds where Skills don’t exist?

“Do you have such a thing as a hero contract?” I asked, closing in on the princess.

“Y-Y-Yes, we do.”

“How does it work? Can we do it right now?”

“Y-You’re too close!” the princess said, turning red.

Usually, I’d enjoy something like this, but I didn’t really have the time to relish it.

“Hurry up and tell me already!”

“Th-The ritual of commitment is performed on the highest floor of the spire over there.”

Dammit, there’s a ritual? Do I have enough time? “Let’s go. I wanna commit myself to you right now.”

“C-Commit?!”

“I’m not saying anything weird, am I? Come on, let’s go!” I tried to pull her by the arm, but she had frozen up.

“U-Um, I’m very grateful that you’ve so quickly decided to work with me… However, would you not like to take a month to think it over? We could return you to your world in a month’s time.”

Look, I appreciate it and all, but this kindness is so not necessary right now!

“I’ve already made up my mind. I want to spend the rest of my life here, with you. Come on!”

“Th-The rest of your life? With *me*?!”

Oh, for fuck’s sake! You’re too pure! Just as I was considering forcefully carrying her to the ritual site, a black magic circle appeared beneath my feet.

“Wh-What?!”

“Damn, I’m out of time.”

Not wanting the princess to get dragged along with me, I let go of her. She looked yearningly at my hand, but that didn’t matter anymore.

“Sorry, Princess. It’s been fun, even if it was short. You’re gonna need to get someone else to save your world.” As those words left my mouth, I vanished from her world.

“I-I forgot to ask his name…”

Unfortunately, I never got to see the way a princess like her looked when she was disappointed.

“Argh… Dammit! I was so close.”

“Poor you. Couldn’t bag the princess, huh?”

“That wasn’t my main goal, anyway.” *Wait, had she been watching?*

“Welcome back.”

“I’m getting pretty sick of this.” Maybe it’d be best if I just laid back and waited to be summoned at this point.

“But hey, look how many cheat abilities you have now.”

“They’re really starting to stack up, huh?” No wonder I one-shotted that knight—I still had my vampirism.

Between my immense strength, my Magic Eyes, and the fact that I was no longer human, there was a lot going on with me.

“Oh yeah—can you tell me what’s up with my eye color?”

“Your right eye is black and your left eye is gold.”

What a weird contrast. “Can I cover my left eye with an eyepatch or something, so I don’t stand out as much?”

“Actually, it might be better if nobody really looked at your eyes in general. It’s difficult to see because it’s black, but there’s also a cross in your right eye.”

“Really?!” I lay down on the…ground? Floor?

“Should you really be lazing around right now?”

“Look, lady, I’m mentally exhausted.”

Too much had happened, after all. To be specific, I was being summoned like crazy to different worlds. As I was lying there, a magic circle appeared beneath me once again, enveloping me in a black light.

“Three more times?” I asked.

“So long as nobody else summons you.”

“Ugh… Don’t jinx it.”

And just like that, I was whisked off to the next world.

◇

I’m Shina—the self-proclaimed best dark sorcerer in a world where dark magic is not viewed favorably. Despite being labeled a heretic, I’d worked hard to hone my dark magic and continue my research. Transportation is just one of the great innovations of dark magic, and it’s not an exaggeration to call it magic that can save worlds.

I’d continued my research for two hundred years, and now, my dark magic was at its pinnacle. I’d grown too old to spread my magic across the world, though, so I’d used various healing methods to prolong my life. Even that, however, was reaching its limit.

Though my appearance may have been youthful, my life was nearing its end. If I perished, dark magic would most likely perish with me. I couldn't let that happen, no matter what.

I had decided that I needed to find a successor, but there was no one in this world who would inherit my knowledge. Knowing that, I had switched my focus to have someone from a different world become my successor.

Despite not being as proficient with dimensional transportation magic, I began the hero summoning ritual, using the remaining embers of my life to power it. And, though I did succeed…

"Wahey… That makes five."

The person who appeared before me was lying lethargically on the floor.

"Excuse me. Why are you lying down?"

"I'm just kinda done with it all," he replied listlessly.

"O-Oh…" I let out a sigh.

"So whaddya need? You summoned me, so there's gotta be something."

"Oh, right. Ahem." I coughed, turning my focus back to the matter at hand. "You don't appear disoriented or confused about your new surroundings… But at any rate, I have summoned you to this world for the purpose of inheriting my dark magic."

"Amazing."

"That's…not the reaction I was expecting. You see, in this world, dark magic is ostracized."

"Brilliant."

"That's…also not the reaction I was expecting. Anyway, I think dark magic has the potential to save this world."

"Crazy."

"I've studied dark magic for two hundred years, bringing it to the peak of perfection."

"Damn."

"But as a result, I have little life remaining, so I don't have enough time to save this world with my magic."

"Excellent."

"As such, I would like you to inherit my dark magic—the fruits of my labor!"

"Looks like the letter 'E' is where my reactions end."

"Were you even listening to me?!" How long is this guy going to stay on the floor?!

"Aw, don't get mad. You're gonna ruin your natural dark-haired beauty."

"B-Beauty?! Hang on, whose fault do you think it is that I'm getting angry?!"

"So how am I supposed to inherit the 'fruits of your labor'?"

"Oh, you *were* listening. Well, you should have received the ability to use what I've learned as soon as you were summoned."

"So that's my cheat ability this time, huh?"

"'Cheat'?"

I had no clue what he was talking about, but more importantly, I couldn't understand how he was so calm. It was as if he'd been summoned multiple times and had gotten used to it by this point. But these were questions that could be asked later. My time was limited, and I had far more pressing priorities.

"So, will you inherit my knowledge?"

"Mm, nah." With these words, he flatly rejected me.

That only made sense, though. He had been torn from his world without notice, and suddenly asked to inherit my magic. Of course he'd refuse.

"If you agree, I'll allow you to do anything with my body. I may not have long to live, but my body is still young and…inexperienced."

"As tempting as that sounds, it's just not gonna work for me."

"Am I not attractive enough for you?"

"No, that's not it. A hottie like you is welcome any day of the week, but I'm about to disappear from this world."

No sooner had he said that than an orange magic circle began to glow beneath him. The light was so intense that it filled the room, blinding me. By the time I was able to open my eyes, he'd vanished, leaving me dumbfounded.

◇

"'I'll be back.'"

"That's not how you use that line," the goddess snapped at me.

Who cares? No need to be so nitpicky.

"I feel bad for the person you just left."

"Can't she just resummon me?"

"Summoning someone from a different world isn't as simple as you think. She traded her remaining life for the magic power required to summon you. She couldn't resummon you now even if she gave her life in the process."

"Oh, jeez."

"All that's left for her now is to lament the summoning and spend the rest of her life alone and unable to fulfill her wish."

"Oh…"

Hearing that explanation, I realized that I'd done something kinda bad.

"Plus, the world that she lives in is one that I preside over, so I know her a little. Ah…that poor girl."

"Uh…" I could tell that she was looking at me with disapproval. "Look, it's not my fault! It's their fault for summoning me."

"Oh, now you're getting defensive?"

Of course I was! In the first place, *I* was the victim here.

"How unfortunate for her. She may have been able to avoid this tragedy if she'd merely waited one day before performing the summoning ritual."

Yeah, it's funny how fate works.

The entire time that I was talking with the goddess, I remained lying down because I couldn't be bothered to stand up. So when the orange light

shone from beneath me to summon me to a different world, I simply stayed like that.

"The time has come! The demon king is revived!"

"Our king has returned from hell!"

It was immediately obvious that I'd been summoned to a world with a demon king.

"Behold our king in all his glory!"

"Oh, what a dignified stance. That's our king!"

I had no clue why they thought lying down was a good thing. Sorry to burst your bubble, guys, but I'm only lying down 'cause standing's a pain.

"What kind of weapons will our king create for us?"

Hm? "Weapons"? The demon king can create weapons?

"How do you feel, my liege?" a beautiful woman asked…or at least, I wish it had been a beautiful woman, instead of this old fart with hollow cheeks. Judging by the horn growing out of his head, he was most likely a demon or something.

"Not bad. More importantly, what is the status of this world?" If they thought that I was the demon king, I at least needed to act like one.

"Oh, how tragic. It seems that your memories were lost during the summoning."

Technically, no, because I wasn't revived or anything. I'm afraid your demon king is in another summon.

"Yes, that would appear to be the case," I said, playing along.

"Allow me to explain your duties, my liege. We would like you to help create weapons for us—demon swords! Then, we of your army will slaughter the weak humans of this world! With the whole world falling into our grasp, we will build a paradise for demons!"

The demon king makes their swords? I hadn't expected the king to be a weaponsmith.

"Hm…" I paused for a moment's thought before answering. "Sorry, guys, but I'm not the demon king. I'm not even a demon. I'm just a human from a different world. Also, I'm about to be summoned to another world, so pretty much everything you've just done has been a complete waste of time! Sorry!"

I would have loved to see their shocked faces, but I had to settle for their roars of confusion as I was enveloped in a purple light and summoned away.

"Hello world."

"That's *really* not how you use that line."

What, couldn't think of a better retort, dear goddess?

"I must say, you're quite the devil."

"Since I was summoned as the demon king, I figured I'd just play my cards straight and then laugh at their reactions." *And I got so close too.* "Do you know why I was summoned instead of their dead king?"

“The soul of their king has already been reincarnated. He was actually a peaceful individual and only made weapons. Since it was his subordinates that acted on their own to commit atrocities, his time in hell was shortened.”

“And that’s why I was summoned instead? What a mess.”

“Fun fact: the demon king has been doing his best as the child of that world’s hero.”

“Seriously...what a mess.”

At the very least, he probably didn’t have any memories of his past life… But wouldn’t it be fun if he did?

“Well, the next summoning will be your last one. I’ll put all your ‘cheats’ in order for you.” The goddess placed both of her hands over my head, closed her eyes, and began to focus.

Oh, wow, her eyelashes are so long.

“Stop thinking about stupid things.”

Crap, she read my mind.

“I’d recommend checking your status as soon as you’re summoned. If you look at it with your Eye of True Sight, you should be able to understand your Skills down to their finest detail.”

I had to say, I was very grateful for her thorough concern.

A purple light glowed underneath me. This time, I decided that I’d at least stand up, since it’d be my last summoning. *My last summoning, huh?* I started to feel a little sentimental...or not, actually. *I wanna hurry up and sleep in a bed.*

“Well, good luck. It’s been a while since I got to talk to someone for so long. It was fun.”

“Yeah, for me too. Later.”

“I hope we meet again.”

But truth be told, I didn’t want to be dragged through this again. I was done with being summoned. As I disappeared from the goddess’s world, I hoped that this would be the last time.

◇

“Welcome, heroes!”

This phrase deserved an award for being the phrase I’d heard the most recently.

“Wh-Where are we?”

“Ryuto? Aoi?”

“Tamaki!”

Hm? I hear other voices. I looked to either side of me, and there they were—three other people around my age, freaking out.

“Huh? The legend was for three heroes…”

Okay. So there are three of them, and they seem to know each other...and then there’s me, the outsider. Huh.

“I was roped into someone else’s summon again?!”

Chapter 1

“So, to summarize... Those three are our heroes, and you’re simply a layman who was swept up in the summoning?”

“Yeah, that would be my guess.”

The first person I spoke with was an old guy who was most likely the king. Meanwhile, said trio of heroes were still dumbfounded.

“Hm... This is the first I’ve heard of someone being unintentionally summoned. It’s hard to believe, especially without any precedent to reference. For now, would you mind touching this stone? It will reveal what Divine Blessing you’ve received.” At these words, he brought out a stone slab that had a magic circle drawn on it.

“Sure, I’ll go first. I just place my palm in the middle like this?”

“Place it wherever you’d like. Just be certain that your palm touches it.”

The stone began to glow dimly as my palm made contact with it, and writing appeared, forming the word “Detect.”

What a simple-sounding ability. “Detect. Hm... Detect.”

“It appears that you have been given a Divine Blessing. However...”

Since the ability seemed neither incredibly strong nor useful, it probably wasn’t enough for him to tell whether I was a hero or not. While the king and I racked our brains over my ability, it seemed that the other three had finally come to their senses.

“U-Um, would you mind explaining the situation to us?”

“Ah, my apologies. This fellow here was so comfortable with the situation that I simply began to follow his lead. Please allow my daughter, the first princess and the one who summoned you all, to answer your questions.” He pointed behind himself to where a small-framed girl with golden pigtails was standing.

“Heh! So you lot are the heroes I’ve summoned, are you? You should be grateful!”

Oh, the cheeky princess trope! Hell yeah!

“Hurry up and kneel before me!”

Just as we had been ordered, the four of us knelt before the bite-size princess. Notably, there were a good number of large-framed knights surrounding us. *Scary. Is this one of those so-called stress interviews?* A light novel protagonist might have objected to this, but...it seemed wiser to just play along and not make a fuss.

Now that I was down on my knees, though, I think it’s important to note that the princess was wearing a long skirt, so even kneeling, I couldn’t see beneath it. *Damn.* She might’ve been too small and young for my tastes, but I was positive that she’d become a beauty in the future—a super beauty, in fact. Her only flaw was her shitty personality, but then again, I was sure that there were people out there who actually liked that kind of thing.

“I’m gonna explain the situation you’re in now. You should be grateful!”

So how many times are we supposed to thank you, exactly?

"You are now in our country, the Rising Sun Kingdom."

All at once, I pictured some good-looking guys in dazzling outfits—guys with sunglasses and beautiful voices, dancing a special kind of number on a stage. *Wow, that's a vivid image.* The name of this country was so powerful that it made me imagine a certain "exiled" boy band. I never thought a country could have such a flashy name.

"We also go by the name 'the Land of the Rising Sun.'"

Stop, stop! Don't bring Japan into this too!

"In this world, there are humans, demi-humans, and demons. I'll talk about them more later, but essentially, demons are the enemies of us humans. They want to invade our lands and make their king the supreme leader."

Wait, what about the demi-humans?

"So, to put a stop to that, the Maccad Empire—the Suzerain of the Human Federation Alliance—has called upon other countries to summon heroes."

Oh, thank god; there's at least one country with a normal-sounding name.

"Only female members of royalty like myself can summon heroes. You should be grateful!"

Yeah, yeah. Thank you sooo very much.

"Each country will train the heroes they've summoned so we can make an army of them to take on the demon king and his forces. Amazing, right?!"

I honestly hadn't expected a "quantity over quality" strategy. It struck me as being in the same vein as "spray and pray" in shooters.

"So that's where you lot come in. You're gonna become strong enough to represent our Rising Sun Kingdom and not embarrass us while you take down the demon king!"

Please stop saying the name of your kingdom. It's causing me physical pain.

"E-Excuse me, First Princess, but may I ask a question?" said Ryuto, one of the three heroes. Judging by his sporty, manly-man physique, he must have been the protagonist.

"I'll allow it. You should be grateful!"

"Are we able to go back to our original world?"

Yeesh, what a boilerplate question. Although maybe it was only logical that this was the question he asked. After being summoned so much, my common sense wasn't so common anymore.

"Nope. You're stuck here. But isn't that great? You get to be proud heroes of the Rising Sun Kingdom. There's no reason for you to go back. You should be grateful!"

We're stuck here? You guys could stand to learn from Haigen Kingdom's hospitality. Also, this princess was seriously selfish.

“Wha—” Ryuto reacted as if he were about to snap, but stopped himself from saying anything else after the knights behind him unsheathed their swords in unison.

Smart. There’s no reason for you to get angry right now.

“I’ll magnanimously ignore that little act of insolence. You should be grateful.”

How many more times is she gonna ask for our gratitude before she’s satisfied? What is this, a new religion? Gratefulism?

“I doubt it, but are there any other questions?”

“I got one. That okay?” I asked.

“Go ahead. I’ll allow it. You should be grateful.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m *really* grateful. I’m exploding with gratefulness.”

At my sass, the knights behind me stirred a little.

“Is this guy *really* parodying Kaiji right now?!” I heard Ryuto mutter.

Oh? Are you an otaku? Out loud I said, “Are there levels and stats in this world?”

“Huh? What are those?”

“Never mind.” I withdrew my question.

The two girls in the trio had fixed me with a cold stare. Ryuto, on the other hand, was looking at me with understanding. *What’s your deal? Are you really an otaku?*

I let out a sigh of relief. Based on the princess’s answer, there was a chance that I could get fairly strong in this world as long as everything was as I expected.

“Very well. I’d like all of you to touch this stone slab. Afterwards, we will test both your physical and magical abilities. Worry not. If it is determined that you are not heroes, we will not treat you harshly.”

He said this to all of us, but it seriously sounded like he was singling me out. At the very least, though, even if I wasn’t a hero, I still had a Divine Blessing, which made me an important being in this country.

“I’ll give it a try,” Ryuto said.

As he touched the stone, the words “Limit Breaker” appeared on it. For the record, the only thing this stone slab could do was reveal the name of an ability, not how it worked. Without any of the details, it was impossible to know if his ability was the kind that doubled your stats, like Hysterical Strength from that certain series about fighting fire with fire, or if he would completely surpass his limits as a human to the point where he stopped being one, like that one villain from a bizarre adventure. If I had to guess, there was a high chance that it was the former, but without a way to check our stats, we had no way of knowing for sure.

Touching the slab revealed that the girl named Tamaki had “Magical Affinity,” and the other girl, Aoi, had “Barrier Magic.” In other words, Ryuto was the swordsman, Tamaki was the magic user, and Aoi was the support. And then there was me: the afterthought with Detect.

Why do I feel so left out? Hm... Maybe, with this power, I can become a thief or a scout?

In the physical test that followed, Ryuto displayed that he had insane strength. Meanwhile, Aoi and especially Tamaki showed they had superhuman levels of magic in the magic aptitude test. As for me? It was a complete blowout. I had mana, but I couldn't use it at all, and there was no chance of that changing. I got the feeling that I'd been stronger when I was previously summoned, but here, I could barely do anything.

It was kinda depressing how I was maybe ten times weaker than the two girls here. But, you know what? Whatever. They're heroes. Plus, I had a headache, so I couldn't really do my best. None of that bothered me at all.

I thought that my physical strength had been enhanced by my vampirism, but maybe that was just my imagination. Maybe the knight I had one-shotted back then was just incredibly weak. No idea how he had gotten the job if so, but...

After we'd completed the tests, we were beckoned to our seats at their banquet. While we ate the food, which wasn't all that great (though the three of them really seemed to enjoy it), we received words of encouragement from the king and words of scorn from the first princess, making for quite an eventful time. When the banquet concluded, we were guided to individual rooms in the castle, complete with our own personal maids. *Now* this *is a service I can get behind.*

Later that night, the four of us gathered in Ryuto's bedroom. It wasn't too impressive in terms of size, but it did come equipped with a bed as well as a few other things.

"Thanks for coming, everyone," Ryuto said, kicking off the conversation.

"Uh-huh. Why's *this* guy here, though?" Tamaki asked, pointing at me. "He's not a hero, right? It's a bad idea to bring a noncombatant to fight."

At first, I thought she was just being a bitch, but maybe she was actually concerned about me. *Is she a tsundere?* She had light-brown hair tied into a bun behind her head. As for her chest, it was…flat. There was no sign of any kind of protrusion beneath her school uniform's dress shirt, and I made a mental note to avoid the topic around her.

She may have been slender, but she wasn't delicate. If anything, she was sturdy. Her lightly tanned skin was illuminated from within by her healthy blood flow. She had sharp, indomitable eyes, and the nape of her neck was beautiful.

"I think his Detect ability is really valuable," said Ryuto. "I'm absolutely certain that we need him. I'd even go so far as to say that, out of all of us, his ability is the most practical. Besides, there's no need for us to exclude him."

Well, he had a point. Not only could I scout, but I could be helpful in night battles, in hectic battles, and as a lookout too.

“We’re gonna get wiped when he inevitably trips us up and we have to cover for him. Hard pass.”

*Not “if,” but “*when*”?!* Though as much as she bitched about protecting me, she wasn’t denying that she would do it. *How nice of her. Unlike that princess, she’s a real tsundere.*

“Right… Since he can’t really fight, I was hoping that Aoi could protect him with her barrier spells.”

“If you say so, Ryuto. I’ll do my best.”

In contrast to the explosive Tamaki, Aoi was much more reserved but still very expressive and cute. She also had enormous boobs. It probably took every fiber of her dress shirt’s being to contain them. She was wearing a vest over it, but that wasn’t enough to keep them hidden. Their apparent size was only enhanced when compared to the washboard over there.

Her skin was pale, with a slight pink tint from her blood, but she didn’t strike me as unhealthy. The nape of her neck poking out from the collar of her shirt was white and glistening. Now that I could get a good look at all three of them, it was like I was at a gathering of beautiful people. Were these real normies? Winners at life? Main characters?!

“You’re too softhearted, Ryuto,” Tamaki complained.

“That’s hardly new for him, right?” Aoi smiled.

“Oh, you two…” Ryuto chuckled.

It was like this world was made for the three of them, and then there was me, just kinda here in the middle of it all. Oh, right, almost forgot. There was a question I wanted to ask them.

“Sorry, but how do I know we’re really from the same world?”

“Huh?”

“No matter how I look at it, none of you are regular Japanese high schoolers.”

The girls made an expression as if I were crazy, but Ryuto looked like he was giving my question some actual thought. *Makes sense that he picked up on what I was implying, being a closet otaku and all.*

“So, you think that we could be from parallel worlds?”

At Ryuto’s words, the two girls made sounds of surprise and understanding.

Normally, the idea of parallel worlds would be nothing more than fantasy, but the odds of them existing seemed much higher, given the fact that we had been summoned to this world. Plus, I’d already been summoned to multiple different worlds, so I already basically thought of parallel worlds as a fact. Their existence was already theorized by physics, anyway.

“Do we need to discuss this right now?” Ryuto asked, raising his head.

“I dunno, but there’s a chance that our values and the way we think about things could be slightly different. It might be important for us to get everything out there before something we can’t fix happens down the line.”

Maybe I was just worrying about nothing, but after having seen things like this happen in a couple of series, I couldn’t help but bring it up.

“How do you propose we figure that out? Do you wanna compare what we know?”

“Nah, that’d take too much time. I just want some kind of proof, even if it’s circumstantial, that we’re from the same world.” The question was what to do. *Oh, right, this guy’s a closet otaku.* “‘Perfection, Ryuto,’” I said to him.

“‘I’m pleased that you’re pleased, sir,’” he replied.

All at once, our hands met in a handshake, leaving the girls completely confused.

“So, do you think we should stay here?” Tamaki asked.

“Why not? This country’s great! And so hospitable! What’s there to complain about?” I asked, laughing as I tapped out a message on my phone to show them what I really wanted to say.

“These poor people are being terrorized by the demon king! There’s no way we can let that slide. We gotta do our parts as the heroes!” Ryuto said, staring down at what I’d written.

I knew he’d get what was going on.

I’d written: *They’re listening. Don’t say anything strange.* Thanks to my amazing Detect ability, I could see through walls and sense people and other living organisms—which meant I could see that there was someone listening right outside our door. For the record, we’d sent all the maids away, so whoever was out there was either a third party, or perhaps a maid who didn’t follow our orders.

“I think that’s everything covered, right? Let’s get to know each other better! You three seem acquainted already, but I don’t know anything about you guys.”

At the same time as I spoke those words, I typed out: *Aoi, can you make a soundproof barrier?*

I figured I might as well ask. If she couldn’t, then our only option would be to talk under a blanket or something. Aoi nodded in agreement and held both of her hands up to the ceiling, at which point I felt a little twinge from my Detect.

“There, I did it. But it’s my first time doing this, so I don’t know how long I can maintain it.”

“Nah, awesome work, Aoi. Thanks!”

Aoi giggled happily at Ryuto’s compliment. *Hey, would you two mind flirting on the* outside *of the barrier?* Regardless, it seemed as though we instinctively knew how to use our abilities, which was crazy convenient. Thanks to that, we now had a soundproof barrier around us.

“What’s the point of this? Is it a problem if they eavesdrop?” Tamaki asked, an irritated look on her face.

“Why do you think they would eavesdrop on us? By the way, the people eavesdropping on us are probably from the government.” I couldn’t be

bothered to spell things out for her anymore, so I answered her question with one of my own.

Ryuto hazarded a guess. “They’re trying to see if we’re rebels?”

“I think so too,” said Aoi.

“Huh?! Why?!” Tamaki asked.

Not just a tsundere, but a dumbass too, huh?

“Listen, Tamaki,” said Ryuto. “You might not have realized it yet, but to them, heroes can be a threat to this world. What do you think will happen if they think *we’re* going to try to overthrow them?”

“You think they’ll attack us while we’re still weak? The hell?! But they’re the ones who summoned *us*!”

Thanks for spelling it out in my stead, Ryuto. Now, while their actions were expected, it was the principle of the matter that rubbed me the wrong way.

“The country’s probably panicking.” As soon as I said this, I was met with three looks of confusion, which meant I needed to explain my reasoning. “I’m not entirely sure since I don’t know what’s considered normal in this country, but I think they’re in financial trouble.”

“What makes you think that?”

“First, the king spends too much of his time moving around. I’m not sure whether it’s a lack of manpower or just a lack of desire to serve him, but either way, that’s a problem. In general, there are too few servants. The food sucks. And the rooms that they gave us in this so-called castle are too small.” I aired all my grievances thus.

Though I had called them hospitable previously, there were way too many things for me to nitpick. It was as if they were overcompensating with their hospitality. Any regular person who had been summoned here directly from their own world might not have realized it, but having been summoned to the Haigen Kingdom before, I had a point of reference. Sure, maybe this world was just completely different, but honestly speaking, I highly doubted that having someone listen in on us was the best use of their resources.

“I see…”

“The food was good, though.”

“Sure, it was simple, but the spices and garlic they used really brought out the flavor. Kinda like a less fancy Italian dish?”

“I ate the whole thing.”

Hm? Am I the odd one out here? “W-Well, anyway. Setting our taste preferences aside… The chef might have been talented, but there weren’t any gourmet foods on the menu, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Now that you mention it…”

Right, let’s just say that was my main point.

“Are you saying that this country might be on the brink of ruin or something?”

“Yeah, and they summoned heroes to prevent that.” *It’s possible that they receive some kind of reward from the Suzerain of the Federation*

Alliance for doing so. I exhaled, then continued. “Going forward, we should keep the idea of leaving in mind. Fortunately, we have my Detect ability, so we should be able to elude any guards. We might even be able to find a way to go back to our original world.”

Those last few words got a reaction out of the three of them. Right now, we were probably this country’s lifeline; there was no way that they’d let us just slip between their fingers. While they claimed that it wasn’t possible for us to return, there was a chance that they were only lying to us.

“But it’d be stupid for us to try to find a way to go back right now,” I added.

“Agreed. We’re sorely lacking in power and knowledge. Plus, in the worst-case scenario, if we leave, the Federation Alliance could easily decide we’re their enemies,” Ryuto agreed.

“Exactly. So let’s just sit back and watch for now.”

“All right. Now that that’s settled, let’s keep an eye on things. While we do that, we need to make sure we get stronger and learn more about this world. If anything happens, we’ll deal with it then. Any objections?” Ryuto clapped his hands together, summarizing our plans.

“No.”

“None here.”

“Nope.”

The three of us nodded in agreement, though I was unsure if Tamaki really understood what was going on.

“Okay. Any other questions?”

“Yeah, I got one.” Tamaki raised her hand.

“Hm? What is it?”

“It’s a question for him.” Tamaki jabbed her finger at me.

“Me? Sure, I’ll tell you anything you want, except for my three sizes.”

“Wasn’t interested in the first place!”

Oh, a decent retort. That’s promising.

Tamaki let out an exasperated sigh before continuing. “Why’s your left eye yellow?”

Oh shit! I completely forgot about that! How could I forget that I’m the only Japanese person in existence with a yellow eye?! Of course I stand out!

Aoi seemed to have been wondering the same thing, because she nodded in firm agreement with Tamaki’s question. Ryuto, however, was holding his head in his hands for some reason.

“Listen, Tamaki. There are some questions you just shouldn’t ask,” he said. “He’s that age, after all...well, albeit a little older than normal. You should just let sleeping dogs lie.”

Ryuto! You think I’m some cringey edgelord wearing colored contact lenses?! Hold on. That’s a great idea! I’m gonna run with that!

“Wh-What?!” Feigning surprise, I covered my left eye with a hand. “I-Impossible! Did the seal break?!” It felt as though the temperature in the room had dropped by several degrees. “Curses—the seal must have broken

after I crossed through the void of space and time! Tamaki, you didn't see anything, did you? It's a good thing we're inside this soundproof barrier. Otherwise, *he* would have killed you for learning this secret."

I surveyed the three of them for their reactions. The two girls were staring at me coldly, while Ryuto looked right at me, red-faced. *What, did you go through a phase like this too, Ryuto?*

"All right. We good on questions?" I asked, covering my eye as if nothing had happened.

Of course, there were no questions—just awkward expressions. I felt like, in exchange for protecting my secret, I'd lost something important.

◇

I was now lying in bed after that agonizing experience in Ryuto's room. If I remembered right, all I had to do was think the word "status" for my stats to appear before me.

Inori Takafuji / Demon (Vampire — Baron-Class) / Lv. 1
HP: 815/815 / MP: 8067/8067 / STR: 956
VIT: 856 / DEX: 935 / AGI: 1056 / INT: 2256
Unique Skills: [Growth Boost] [5x Exp Multiplier] [½ Required Exp] [Eye of True Sight] [Eye of Sigils] [Contempt for the Sun God] [Vampirism]
[Baron-Class Authority] [Skill Pilfer] [True Dark Magic] [Armament Craft] [Detect] [Level Up] [Skill Acquisition]
General Skills: None
Titles: Indomitable Soul, Involved Against Will

Hm? My stats have risen across the board...by, like, ten times what they'd been before. My MP specifically had risen to about eighty times its previous value. However, this begged the question: why had I been so weak during the physical test?

I got to my feet and easily lifted the bed off the floor. I could even do squats with it, and hold it with just one hand. Looking through my stats, I spotted something that bugged me. *Oh, yeah—if I look at it with my right eye, I can see the details...*

Contempt for the Sun God: Beings of the night who have turned their backs on God. During the day, Skill usage is limited, and your normal stats are one-tenth of their normal values.

Ah, I'd found the reason. It was night now, so my strength had returned to its normal values. I forgot about this obvious downside of being a vampire during daytime. I thought I was cognizant of the fact I was a vampire, but I guess I didn't truly understand what that entailed. Vampires are weak to crosses, hate garlic, turn to ash when the sun hits them, can be killed by silver weapons, and drink the blood of humans.

So, the reason for my headache during the physical test was due to having been in the sun. The reason I thought the food tasted bad was because they'd used garlic when making it. And now that I thought about it, the reason I had been so interested in the napes of Tamaki's and Aoi's necks was probably because I was drawn to their blood.

There were still so many parts of myself that I seemed to have overlooked. I'd been so focused on using my Detect ability to look outwards that I had never looked at myself. In general, people can only look inwards or outwards, but as they say: know thyself, know thy enemy. In other words, I needed to read the details of my Skills.

Growth Boost: Growth of abilities, levels, and rate of Skill acquisition is improved. Also, you are able to surpass the limits of your race.

5x Exp Multiplier: The experience gained when killing something is multiplied by five. Experience points received for Skill allotment are multiplied by five.

½ Required Exp: The experience required to level up and for acquiring Skills is halved.

Eye of True Sight: A Magic Eye that grants its user extreme vision.

Absolute Movement Vision (The ability to accurately track your target, regardless of how fast they move)

Absolute Measurement (The ability to accurately measure the size of your target)

Far-sight (The ability to inspect your target at a distance)

Microscope (The ability to inspect any small objects)

Night Vision (Bestows perfect vision even in the dark)

Appraisal (Displays the stats of humans and the details of objects)

Omniscience (The ability to observe distant areas from an overhead, third-person view)

Anti-Illusion (The ability to dispel any illusion)

Clairvoyance (The ability to see through objects)

Photographic Memory (The ability to precisely remember anything you see)

Light Wave Vision (The ability to see wavelengths of light that are typically impossible for the human eye to perceive)

Eye of Sigils: Store a magic circle you see in your eye and activate it at a time of your choosing. When activated, one-tenth of the original MP cost is used. Can be cast without

incantation. Can store one at a time. Can overwrite the stored magic circle with a new one.

Vampirism: Drinking a living organism's blood restores HP, MP, and raises stats. If you drain a lethal amount of blood, the target becomes a ghoul. After a kill, covering them in your blood makes them your retainer. If you drain a lethal amount of blood from a human and then inject your blood into them, they will become a vampire (thrall) if they are a virgin. If they are not a virgin, they will become a ghoul. If you drain all the blood from your target, you will gain their memories.

Baron-Class Authority: Vampiric weaknesses are reduced. Can command any undead under Baron-Class.

Skill Pilfer: Drinking the blood of your target allows you to steal a Skill. If they don't have one, you steal a hidden potential instead, converting it into a Skill. Both General and Unique Skills can be received.

True Dark Magic: The pinnacle of dark magic. Freely use dark magic to its maximum efficiency without the need for any incantations. Can reference the knowledge of the one known as "Shina." MP greatly boosted.

Armament Craft: Create a weapon from materials in exchange for mana. First, imagine the shape of the weapon, then edit it at completion. Possible to apply abilities using knowledge you possess (mana cost is increased accordingly).

Detect: Can detect the presence of living organisms in the range of your awareness. Boosts the ability to sense presences, to sense magic, and the senses of sight, hearing, and smell.

Level Up: Killing a living organism grants experience points, which can be used to raise your level.

Skill Acquisition: Can gain Skills by using experience points gained from fixed actions.

From the look of things, Growth Boost, 5x Exp Multiplier, and ½ Required Exp all applied to Skills too. Vampirism was kinda complicated, but the gist of it seemed to be that if I didn't want to make more undead, I had to make sure that I didn't drain enough blood to kill someone.

Meanwhile, the details of Skill Pilfer seemed to have changed from when I'd last seen them. Now I needed to drain someone's blood instead of just touching them. *Ugh, what a pain.* Apparently, doing so would give me their memories, which was probably how I obtained their Skill. Either way, it was nice that I could still get Skills, even though they didn't exist in this world.

Armament Craft required me to possess the necessary materials for crafting. There wasn't much of an explanation about how I could imbue what I crafted with abilities, though.

The reason my MP was so high probably had to do with True Dark Magic. It was weird that despite that, I hadn't done well on the magic test. I should've had good control over magic, after all.

Level Up and Skill Acquisition seemed like filler abilities. I got the sense that the goddess may have tweaked them a little so that I could use them no matter what world I ended up in.

The abilities that I'd received as Gifts were all Unique Skills. *Ah, yes, I appreciate the simplicity here.* One of the things I wanted to test was my Eye of True Sight. From what I gathered, it basically allowed me to see whatever I wanted, but maybe I needed to take it for a test drive. If I understood correctly, I should be able to stack the use of its abilities.

I sent my vision past the door using Clairvoyance, whereupon I immediately found a maid. Using Appraisal, I saw that her name was Nala. Next, I used Absolute Measurement to see that her height was 161 cm and that her three sizes were 79 cm, 61 cm, and 80 cm. Finally, I used Clairvoyance again to see through her clothes. *And I'm glad to report that she's wearing black underwear!*

That was where I decided to call it quits, though, because looking any deeper than that would make me a total pervert! As a personal rule, I decided that people's underwear was as far as I'd go. I didn't think I'd be able to stop myself otherwise. More importantly, I liked ogling their clothing. Seeing their naked bodies would just ruin all the fun. Anyhow… *Ms. Maid? Would you happen to be the kind of gal who's a lady in the streets, but a freak in the sheets? I like your style.*

The other thing I wanted to test out was Armament Craft. I took the candles off of the candleholder and examined it. From what I could tell, it was most likely made of silver. *Wait, as a vampire, am I gonna be okay? Eh, whatever. Time to make a knife.*

"Armament Craft!"

It felt as though something was being pulled out of my body—possibly my mana. Then, the candleholder began to change shape, eventually turning into a plain knife. From what I could tell with my Eye of Appraisal, there was nothing special about it.

```
Silver Dagger (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: B / Value: 10500 Dells
```

A pure silver knife. Its craftsmanship is superb, but as it's made of silver, it's not of much use. It serves little purpose as decoration either.

Hm, that made sense. Since silver is an extremely malleable metal, it had absolutely no value as a weapon. It had cost about fifty MP to make it, meaning that a normal person with this ability could probably make two of these. Apparently it was very sharp, though, because merely touching the tip of the blade immediately drew blood. Either way, it had served its purpose as my test subject, so it was time to change it back to its original shape.

"Armament Craft!"

Huh? Nothing happened. What's going on? I'm not short on MP... Oh! A candlestick isn't a weapon! Armament Craft could only make weapons. *Duh.* Wait—so did that mean that I'd be stuck with this knife? What was I supposed to do with this?

Oh wait, how about... "Armament Craft!"

The knife changed into its original candleholder shape. *Okay, time to appraise it.*

Candleholder (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 500 Dells
At first glance, it seems like a normal candleholder. However, it has a secret gimmick: push a button and the candleholder's needle will jut out and become a knife.

I apologize in advance to the maid who has to clean my room... This candleholder is now a knife. But I'm sure no one will find out...right? Right?! Setting that aside, it didn't sit right with me that its value had somehow decreased after becoming a candleholder again.

After that, I decided to test out the rest of my Skills—at least, the ones that wouldn't make any noise. I especially wanted to try out dark magic. With it, I'd probably be able to do things like control shadows, jump into them, store things in the shadow world, manipulate objects from a distance, and much more. However, it was hard to test these abilities in my room. I'd have to try things out later when I had a chance to slip out of my room.

One thing I *could* try out right now was the Eye of Sigils. As a test, I decided to try to manipulate my shadow into the shape of a magic circle, but my eye didn't seem to want to play ball at the moment. *Well, for now, let's learn more about this world's magic, then try again later.*

"Ryuto Shinzaki!"
"Here!"
"Tamaki Karasawa."
"Here!"

“Aoi Isoya.”

“Here.”

“Inori Takafuji.”

“’Sup?”

“Very good. You’re all present. I’m the captain of the Rising Sun Kingdom Knights, Aegiana Itze, and I will be your drill instructor. You may call me Aegiana, Itze, or Captain.”

The next day, we began our training. Both Ryuto and Aoi looked like they wanted to pass out, most likely because they’d been too nervous to sleep. Who could blame them in a situation like this, though? On the other side of the spectrum, however, Tamaki looked completely refreshed. *How shameless.*

For the record, I was also in the sleep-deprived camp, but this was not because of nerves—it was due to my vampirism. As a member of a nocturnal race, I couldn’t sleep at night even if I wanted to. I could have totally conked out on the spot during the day, though. I had trouble keeping my eyes open, and to make it worse, we were training outside, which meant that the sun was beating down on me. *Ugh, my head hurts.*

Apparently, the knight captain in this country was a woman. She wore armor and a skirt, which gave off the feeling of medieval battle dress. She had long, beautiful golden hair that was tied into a ponytail. Her eyes may have been sharp, but she had a gorgeous smile. I couldn’t be completely sure because of her breastplate, but her chest was probably about average. *Very nice.*

She was 171 cm tall, which was on the tall side for a woman. She was a full head taller than both Tamaki and Aoi, and pretty much the same height as Ryuto, at 172 cm. *Thanks, Absolute Measurement.*

As a knight, she should have been no stranger to physical labor, but her skin looked so pale, and her hands looked so soft. *Is this magic?* And why did they have a woman as the captain of an entire country’s knights, anyway? This wasn’t anything too abnormal in a fantasy setting, but...could this be because of their financial problems? Or were they trying to play mind games with us?

“Let’s begin. You girls seem to be proficient with magic, but you need to improve your physical strength as well.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Aoi and Tamaki said in unison.

“Typically, we start with basic strength training, but that seems to be unnecessary for you three.”

Makes sense. They have superhuman stats, after all.

“So, Ryuto, Tamaki, Aoi—the three of you will start by learning martial arts at a beginner’s level, then choosing the one that suits you best. I’ve selected a few knights from my War Maiden Battalion to assist you one-on-one.”

“Yes, ma’am!” all three of them said.

If there was a “War Maiden Battalion,” then that most likely meant that their entire army consisted of women.

“For you, Inori, you’ll begin with strength training. I’ll need you to at least reach a layman’s level of strength.”

“’Kay.”

Seriously? Muscle training? I’m sleepy. My head hurts. First chance I get, I’m gonna run away.

“I’ll be personally overseeing your training. Take it seriously!”

Inori tried to flee! ...But there was no escape.

“Inori! Get up!”

Oops. Fell asleep again.

“Start over, and use the proper form this time! I’m only making you do a hundred push-ups. Get it done already!”

But I’m so tired... My head hurts... And I’m weakened by the sun.

“The fact that you can’t even do thirty of them means that you’re weaker than both Aoi and Tamaki, you know.”

Hey, don’t compare me to those superhumans. It seemed like the three heroes were now learning swordsmanship after having mastered swinging a sword around. It was unclear whether their growth was because of the Divine Blessings, or just plain natural talent. However, my eye helped me look under the hood to see what was going on.

```
Ryuto Shinzaki / Human (Other Worlder) / Rising Sun Kingdom Hero
HP: 1023/1024 / MP: 1056/1056 / STR: 1523
VIT: 1249 / DEX: 1115 / AGI: 1098 / INT 1078
Divine Blessing(s): [Limit Breaker]
Titles: None

Tamaki Karasawa / Human (Other Worlder) / Rising Sun Kingdom Hero
HP: 895/896 / MP: 8962/8962 / STR: 762
VIT: 853 / DEX: 1508 / AGI: 756 / INT: 3568
Divine Blessing(s): [Magic Affinity]
Titles: None

Aoi Isoya / Human (Other Worlder) / Rising Sun Kingdom Hero
HP: 562/563 / MP: 6082/6082 / STR: 563
VIT: 1432 / DEX: 874 / AGI: 593 / INT: 2430
Divine Blessing(s): [Barrier Magic]
Titles: None
```

The three of them had stats that were similar to what I had at night...or maybe even better, actually. But hey, I was still leveling. It's not like I was salty or anything, okay? Seriously.

"Focus!" The captain smacked me.

How mean! Not even my own mother has laid a hand on me before...I think?

```
Aegiana Itze / Human (1.5% Elf) / Captain of the Rising Sun Kingdom Knights
HP: 512/512 / MP: 4562/4562 / STR: 765
VIT: 659 / DEX: 10032 / AGI: 1523 / INT: 9637
Divine Blessing(s): None
Titles: Legend, Mixed Blood, Betrayer, Weapon Master
```

The captain had monstrous stats of her own, as well as a few drops of elf blood in her. It had to have been someone way back in her family tree if it was *that* low of a percentage, though.

Her MP, DEX, and INT were all too impressive. Maybe in this world without levels, dexterity and magic helped to grow these stats. I wondered if that meant there was a way to improve one's magic, or maybe it was thanks to her mixed blood? *Also, what's up with her titles...?*

"Stop dawdling!"

Ow. C'mon, let a guy rest a little!

"I'm coming in!"

"Pardon me."

Some time into our training, the doors to the training hall opened, and two girls entered. One was the cheeky, pigtailed princess who always proclaimed we should "be grateful," otherwise known as the first princess. I had absolutely no clue who the other was, though. Judging by the number of attendants around them, it was probably safe to assume that she was also a princess or something along those lines, especially considering how flashy her clothes were.

With light-brown hair and blue eyes, she was certainly beautiful, but she lacked any outstanding features. A sad side effect of my being exposed to so many beautiful women—even someone as attractive as her became average.

She was just about 160 cm tall, with shoulder-length hair. Her breasts were slightly below average in terms of size, putting her out of the strike zone of both big- and small-boob enthusiasts. As for me, though, I was perfectly fine with them.

The best part about her, though, was her cold expression and her forced smile. She had the aura of a creepy doll.

"Princesses. Why have you come to such a dangerous place?" The captain approached them, leaving me behind her.

Yep, they're both princesses.

“I was curious about how the training was going, so I came to observe. Please, don’t pay us any mind.”

“I did you a favor by clearing my schedule so I could personally come down and watch. You should be grateful.”

“I see. In that case, please take a seat over there.” With a gesture, the captain indicated where they should sit.

Was it normal for vassals to ignore her “grateful” little catchphrase? Now that I thought about it, they’d mentioned something about classroom lectures as well. If the first princess was to be our teacher, I had to prepare myself to be grateful. *Oh, right, I should Appraise the two of them.*

```
First Princess / Human
HP: 75/75 / MP: 2995/3000 / STR: 73
VIT: 62 / DEX: 201 / AGI: 84 / INT: 653
Divine Blessing(s): [Witch’s Blood]
Titles: First Princess of the Rising Sun Kingdom, She Who Gathers Gratefulness

Second Princess / Human
HP: 150/150 / MP: 1048/1048 / STR: 124
VIT: 85 / DEX: 1235 / AGI: 156 / INT: 892
Divine Blessing(s): [Witch’s Blood] [Genius]
Titles: Second Princess of the Rising Sun Kingdom, Princess of Tragedy, Puppet Princess
```

Uh, what the hell is a “She Who Gathers Gratefulness”? More importantly, I’d grasped by now that there were two princesses, but something still didn’t make sense to me. The second princess should have been the younger sibling, but *she* looked like she was in her teens, while the cheeky first princess looked practically like a child. Was it possible that the first princess was much older than she looked? A “legal loli”? Or maybe the second princess had somehow just hit maturity that much faster? In the first place, did they even have names? Surely their names weren’t just “First Princess” and “Second Princess,” right?

In the end, I wasn’t able to clear up any of the questions I had. Ryuto and the others moved on to actual combat lessons, while I continued with strength training. After that, we ate lunch, and then moved on to magic classes and education.

“Hello, Inori. I am the second princess of the Rising Sun Kingdom, and I will be overseeing your education. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

This was the same princess that I’d seen in the training hall earlier. Apparently, the first princess was lecturing the other three in a separate classroom. The reason we weren’t taking classes together was simple: “It’s

absurd for me to teach anyone who isn't a hero," the aforementioned cheeky princess had declared. *Ohhh, one of these days, I'll show you...*

"Nice to meet you." I decided that now would be a good time to ask her the questions that I hadn't been able to ask before. "So, if you're the second princess, that would mean that you're the younger sister of the first princess, right?"

"No... I am her elder sister. Due to certain circumstances, she is first in line to succeed the throne, which is why she is the first princess."

Oh, yeah, I guess there are probably some complicated reasons at play if the right to the throne's involved. Let's leave it at that for now.

"Let us begin. We will start by learning about the Rising Sun Kingdom."

The Rising Sun Kingdom had been founded by a mage who had been one of the original members of the party that defeated the first demon king. At merely three hundred years old, it was still a relatively young country. Since the founder of the country had been a woman, the kingdom's culture revolved around religious faith in witches. Plus, there was a great emphasis on women in general.

Only women were allowed to succeed the throne, but it was customary for the king to reign as regent. The amount of witch's blood inherited by descendants was prized above all else, and thus it was common for the king to have been a prince or the legitimate son of a duke who came from that bloodline himself. Regardless, afterwards, the queen could freely divorce him to deprive him of his rights to the throne.

The name of the country itself was related to its founder. The flag of the country represented the country's name, depicting a sun rising from the horizon. The currency they used was called "Dells," but this wasn't their native currency—rather, it was the currency of the Federation Alliance. To put things into perspective, fifty Dells was enough for a meal.

Their local specialty was apparently monster materials, taken from Treants and Kechos. They were also famous for their magic tools. And then...whatever else she said, I didn't catch, because I nodded right off.

“Inori, please wake up.”

Oh crap, I fell asleep!

“Were you listening?”

“Yeah…more or less.”

I now understood why the knight captain was a woman and why there was a War Maiden Battalion, at least.

“Do you have any questions?”

“Yeah. What are magic tools?”

“They are tools activated by the user’s magic.”

That meant that, in this world, they had developed magic instead of science.

“Anything else?”

“Does this matriarchy extend to villages outside of the castle?”

“No—it’s only relevant to nobles. A lot of manual labor is needed in our army and villages, so we prioritize males in those areas.”

That’s kinda weird. They’re progressive enough to have women climb the social ladder and manage policy, but with their level of civilization being as low as it is, there probably aren’t many jobs for women. I guess those of the lower class probably don’t hire babysitters…

“Any other questions?”

“Mm… What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one.”

Oh. Huh.

“The only name I have is ‘Second Princess.’ Daughters of royalty differ from princes in that we are only given the number of our place in the line of succession.”

Oh, so that’s how it works. It had to be so annoying for the two of them to talk to each other, then, if they didn’t have real names to refer to each other by. Imagine a conversation like, “Hello, First Princess. Nice weather today, isn’t it?” “Not really, Second Princess.” Sheesh.

“If you’ve no further questions, I’ll begin your magic lesson. First, magic circulates through your body… Magic circles and incantations… Using that… Now, there are six properties…”

“Please wake up, Inori.”

Ah!

“Were you listening?”

“I think I caught the first thing you said.”

“So you *weren’t* listening?” She sighed, her expression not changing in the slightest, before beginning her explanation anew.

She didn’t show a single shred of frustration in front of her student, even though I wasn’t taking any of this seriously at all. She just smiled and kept going. Unlike that cheeky princess, this person right here was a *real* princess. Although…there was something a little unnatural about her. As I

pondered this, I felt myself drifting off again.

At long last, I finished my lesson on the basics of magic (despite having slept through most of it). I joined the three heroes for dinner, then returned to my room. Apparently, I would learn about the principles of magic tomorrow, and then have practical magic lessons the day after. Hopefully those practical lessons wouldn't end up being pushed back.

For some reason, we weren't allowed to take baths. The worst part was that they wouldn't give me a straight answer as to why, but I had a feeling that it had something to do with their financial difficulties. We were still able to get clean as the maids would wipe us down, but that wasn't something I could get used to. It was way too embarrassing. I wasn't a pervert who found pleasure in having their body cleaned by someone else.

After that weird form of penance—or perhaps role-play?—was complete, I lay down on my bed. I had probably wasted a lot of time trying to fall asleep last night, but this time I was prepared. I'd borrowed a beginners' spell book from the second princess.

Yeah, it was pretty horrible of me to go borrowing a spell book, considering how I had slept through her entire class on magic, but the second princess hadn't seemed to be bothered one bit when she lent it to me. She had simply worn her usual smile. *You know what? It's annoying to call her the "second princess." I'm gonna call her "Sensei" from now on.*

Yes, as I was saying—wearing her patented smile, Sensei had given me an empty reply. I hadn't sensed a single emotion from her. She felt like one of those princesses who had gracefulness utterly drilled into them. Come to think of it, I'd overheard the retainers calling her "Puppet Princess." It had been one of her titles too. She really was the opposite of that explosive, cheeky princess.

But now was not the time to be thinking about Sensei. It was time for me to supplement everything that I'd missed out on in class with this book I had borrowed. I could use it to test out my Eye of Sigils too. I took off the eyepatch I'd been using to cover my left eye (which I'd obtained courtesy of a maid).

I opened the book to a random beginners' magic circle, but when I tried to store the magic circle in my eye, I couldn't. It didn't feel as if there was currently a magic circle stored in there, and even if there was, I couldn't activate it. I wasn't lacking the mana to activate it either, so...

I tried looking at other magic circles in the book, but none of them worked either. That only left the magic circles I happened to know. Ringing a bell, I summoned Nala, who'd been waiting outside.

"Do you need something?"

"Please bring me a pen and paper."

"Understood." Nala left the room, returning after a few minutes. "Is this acceptable?" she asked, holding out a slightly large pen and a single sheet of paper.

The paper seemed to have been made from a tree. From the looks of it, there wasn't an ink well for the pen, so I must've been able to use it without dipping it into anything.

"I'll take 'em," I said.

"Here you are, then."

I started by drawing test circles in the corners of the paper to make sure that the ink actually worked. It behaved basically like a ballpoint pen. *Impressive. Is this a magic tool too?*

"Thank you. This will do. Could you bring me ten more sheets like this?"

"Certainly, but...what is it that you intend to do with all that paper?"

"Uh, I...want to keep a journal. It'd be fun to document my journey after coming here from a different world, wouldn't you agree?" *Of course, I'm talking out of my ass here...*

"Oh, that makes sense! Yes, that does sound enjoyable!"

Wow. She got so excited that her golden hair, tied up into a ponytail, swayed as she jumped...and so did her breasts.

"I love reading! Would you please show me your journal after you've finished with it?"

"U-Uh... Yeah, sure..." Crap. Now I have to write a journal?!

If I didn't write one, though, it'd be really suspicious, so I guessed that I didn't have a choice. Man, there had to have been a better excuse for needing the paper than what I'd blurted out.

"Let me know when you're finished, okay?"

"Yeah, you got it."

My relationship with Nala leveled up! While she seemed quiet, she was actually very into reading—a so-called literary girl...or woman, I guess, age-wise. *It's still so hard to believe that* she's *the type of girl that wears black panties.*

After that, Nala brought me ten pieces of paper, then left me alone to write. Now I could get into tonight's main event—and I wasn't talking about journal-writing. I was ready to start drawing the magic circles I knew.

The one I had in mind was from the world with that creepy guy who'd used high-level mind interference magic on me. Usually, it'd be impossible to memorize a magic circle just by glancing at it, but thanks to the photographic memory ability that came with my Eye of True Sight, a glance was all I needed to commit it to memory.

After drawing it out perfectly on the sheet, I looked at it with my left eye. Suddenly, I felt as if something had been carved into it. I guessed I could take that as a sign that I'd succeeded. Now, all I had to do was try it out. Truth be told, testing this out on humans would be pretty annoying for a lot of different reasons, but that was a problem for future Inori.

I rang the bell again, and Nala reentered my room.

"How may I help you? Have you completed your journal?"

“No way. That’s not humanly possible. I just wanted to ask you something.”

Activate Eye of Sigils. With this thought, I looked straight into Nala’s eyes. I felt the magic circle activate, signifying the start of the mental interference. My mana decreased a little, but much less than when I’d used Armament Craft.

In the next moment, Nala’s eyelids drooped. It seemed she had entered a hypnotic state. I felt bad doing this right as we’d become friendlier, especially since hypnosis was a great way to get someone to hate you. It looked like I’d have to put my dreams of becoming the protagonist of a love comedy on hold.

For now, after confirming that there wasn’t anyone eavesdropping on us, I decided to ask her some questions. Apparently, there were guards stationed outside the rooms of the heroes, but not outside mine, meaning that they were more important than I was. *Not enough manpower, perhaps?* It must have been pretty hard to watch over even one person for twenty-four hours a day, but somehow, the country in a supposedly poor financial situation still found a way to monitor three people at once! *Wow.* Regardless, I had no reason to fear being overheard, so I could conduct my experiment without being disturbed.

“What color underwear are you wearing?”

“Black.”

It seemed that she was completely under my hypnosis. Don’t get me wrong—I wasn’t sexually harassing her! I was just asking her a question that she wouldn’t normally answer in order to see if she was really in a trance. I swear! Anyway, this was a great opportunity for me.

Based on my experiments thus far, I’d gathered that my eye could only store magic circles from the world in which Magic Eyes existed. This meant that I had exactly one other magic circle I could try—the summoning circle. I’d gotten a good look at it when I was summoned there, so I remembered it clearly. The only problem was that it was a lot bigger and more complicated than the circle I’d just drawn.

I spread all the pieces of paper out and began drawing the magic circle across them.

“Nala, could you hold these down for me?”

“All right.” In her hypnotic state, Nala followed my orders to a tee, which really helped to move things along, especially given how complicated the circle was.

A lot of time had passed by the time we’d finished, but when I finally looked at it, I felt the same sensation of it entering my eye. I’d succeeded. I took a deep breath, looked above my bed, and activated the summoning circle. Suddenly, a yellow magic circle appeared beneath me, and my field of vision was filled with a blinding yellow light. Before I knew it, I found myself on top of my bed.

Apparently, I didn't even have to pass through that blank world to travel a distance this short—I'd just gained the ability to teleport. Of course, it cost me a lot of MP—two thousand, to be exact, but thanks to the reduced mana costs from my abilities, I didn't have to pay the original cost of twenty thousand.

If a normal person had mana reserves of about a hundred MP, it would have taken two hundred people to do what I had just done. This little realization really made me appreciate just how difficult it was to summon someone from a different world.

Now that I had the power to teleport, I could go outside and find a deserted place to test my other Skills.

With the use of my Far-sight and the Eye of Sigils, I teleported to a field within the confines of the capital. As long as I could see my destination, I could plant the magic circle there, meaning that as long as I had both of my eyes open and adjusted on the fly, I could teleport anywhere I could see within a meter's accuracy. This field had a great view, and as far as I could tell with the use of my Detect ability, there was nobody around.

Now that I was out here, I could test my shadow magic. First, I wanted to try using my Puppet Master ability, which allowed me to remotely control objects, to move a few things around. I spotted a branch on the ground, picked it up, and began infusing it with shadows with my Conqueror ability. Slowly, it began to turn black, and within a minute, it had turned the color of the night. Apparently, shadows could devour nonliving things too.

Next, I decided to use both Puppet Master and Conqueror to see if I could control things from a distance. I threw the now darkened branch into the distance, then commanded it to come back to me. Reabsorbing the shadows released it from my control—after a minute or so, the branch had returned to its original color. Snapping or destroying the branch also broke my control over it.

So I could only use Puppet Master on things that were already under the influence of Conqueror. *Now, let's try this out for real.* I took control of the branch again, then tried stabbing myself in the stomach with it, using Puppet Master. Just as I'd imagined, the branch flew towards my stomach at a frightening speed, but stopped right before it made contact with me, leaving me unharmed.

So, basically, I could freely manipulate objects which were under my control, but I couldn't crush, cut, or move other things with them. Plus, if I hadn't fully Conquered the object, I wouldn't be able to manipulate it, since it wouldn't be fully under my control.

In the end, this pretty much meant that darkness magic wasn't a great offensive option. There was also the ability to store things in shadows with Shadow Storage. As a test, I decided to store the branch in a shadow cast by the starlight above. The branch went in, no problem. And if I simply thought about retrieving the item, I was able to pull it easily from the shadow. It seemed I couldn't store anything living in the shadows, though.

But if I combined Shadow Storage with Shadow Manipulation, I was able to store large objects in the shadows. The capacity that each shadow could store seemed to be dependent on the mana of the person or thing which had cast the shadow in the first place.

Perhaps this was the magic that Shina had wanted to spread across the world. This would be a great help with delivering items. You could not only manipulate objects, but store them as well. With Conqueror, you could prevent degeneration of its original condition to a certain degree too.

Finally, I wanted to try out Shadow Walk. This was an ability that allowed its user to enter shadows. Fortunately, there were a lot of trees in this field, so I had no shortage of shadows to travel through. It took me a minute to go from the top of the tree to the bottom, though, demonstrating that this was an extremely slow method of travel.

As mentioned before, the capacity of the shadow was determined by the mana of the person or thing that cast the shadow. So for a tree, which had little to no mana, its shadow was very small and shallow. I'd pretty much had to crawl, which was why it took so long for me to travel across it. It would have been infinitely easier to travel in the shadow of a monster or something. Oh, and of course—I could not enter my own shadow, since it would disappear as soon as I entered it.

That was pretty much it for True Dark Magic, so I moved on to Skill Acquisition. I probably can't do much in one night, but let's start by making a wooden sword from this tree branch. This is just training, so I might as well make something simple. Actually, wait a second... Eh, whatever.

"Armament Craft!" In the next moment, I was holding a lustrous black wooden sword. I looked at it with my Eye of Appraisal.

```
Black Wood Sword (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 18000 Dells
Abilities: Shadow Fortification
It's the same weight as a normal wooden sword, and just as sharp, but with the hardness of steel.
```

The shadow magic I'd cast on the branch had added an effect to the wooden sword. I knew that I could apply abilities to objects if I possessed the knowledge to do so, but that must've meant that this knowledge came from Shina. Since it was under my control, I could even manipulate it. *Damn, this is cool.*

Anyway, it was time to train. During the afternoon's training, I hadn't just been lying around; I had been using my eyes to watch the training of the three heroes, as well as learning the moves of the captain. Thanks to my photographic memory, I knew exactly where to start and how—practice swings.

After swinging the sword for a while, I had a feeling like I'd been struck with inspiration or something. Checking my stats, I saw that it was because I'd gained Swordsmanship Lv. 1. *Looks like Skill Acquisition is working fine.*

Now all that was left was to defeat a monster and level up. I looked across the field and teleported myself into the forest. As I walked through the darkness, I ran into a small bird that looked like an ostrich. *Appraise.*

```
No Name / Bird Monster (Kecho)
HP: 750/765 / MP: 132/132 / STR: 778
VIT: 593 / DEX: 376 / AGI: 1087 / INT: 42
Divine Blessing(s): None
Titles: None
```

Huh? Why's this thing so strong? Was it the strongest monster in the forest? Somehow, I seriously doubted that—especially since it was a Kecho, one of the local specialties of the Rising Sun Kingdom. The feathers in my mattress came from this thing. This was something that the people here hunted.

My second thought was that maybe it was just this specific Kecho that was this ridiculously strong, so I scanned the others in the area. However, they all had stats that were around five to six hundred, save for their INT. More importantly, the stats of this monster as well as some of the stronger monsters here were higher than mine. In fact, it was quite possible that the monsters that had stats ranging from five to six hundred were lower down on the food chain.

What this meant for me was that all the monsters in this forest were ridiculously strong. I might have been able to win in a one-on-one, but I could sense that there were at least another three of them nearby. If I attacked one of them, its screams would probably attract the others, and I'd be surrounded in no time.

I couldn't risk it. I had the option to use my teleportation to escape a fight immediately, but that used up a lot of MP, and I wanted to make sure I had enough to get back to the castle, so I would have preferred not to do that. The sky was also starting to get brighter, meaning that the sun would rise soon. If that happened, I'd definitely be unable to teleport, so I'd be stranded here.

Yep, looks like I need to retreat. I understood quite clearly that I needed to be a little more prepared before I could level up. From a tall tree, I used Far-sight and then teleported back to my room. Unfortunately, what I saw with Far-sight was the wall of my room, so when I teleported back, my destination turned out to be that very same wall. I was lucky enough to have softened my landing so as not to make a noise, but I made a mental note that I needed to figure out a way to stop myself in midair.

Dim lamps, evenly spaced down the sides of a hallway, illuminated the tall figure of a woman. Her long, beautiful, golden ponytail swayed with each step she took, and the *clank* of her golden shoes echoed loudly across the empty hallway each time they came into contact with the stone floor. Though the layered skirt she wore should have clashed with her armor, they complemented each other perfectly, making for quite the seamless ensemble.

Suddenly, the woman stopped. In the distance, she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. To avoid collision, she stood to one side, against the wall. Then, the figure of a young woman appeared at the end of the hallway. There was so little that was remarkable about the woman that she seemed almost to blend into the background. On her lips was a smile that was simultaneously natural and yet unnatural. It was the second princess of the Rising Sun Kingdom.

As she approached, the armored woman bowed her head. Instead of passing her by, though, the second princess came to a stop. After a moment of silence, with her head still bowed, the knight captain of the Rising Sun Kingdom spoke.

“Milady, though we may be within the castle grounds, it is unwise for you to walk around without an escort. Our enemies could be lurking anywhere, at any given time. Please, I ask that you return to your quarters.”

“Captain Aegiana Itze. I have wished to speak with you, alone.”

Aegiana raised her head. As she did so, the second princess’s smile came into full view.

“You’d go so far as to sneak around for that purpose?”

“I wish to discuss the training of the heroes.”

“Is there a problem with it?”

“Today, Inori asked me a question about magic tools. Did you use them during training?”

“We’ve yet to even begin their second day of training. I decided that it would be unwise to have them use magic tools until they first master the basics of martial arts,” Aegiana replied, with a smile.

“But there are only a handful of people in this country who can use magic or martial arts to do battle with the demons. It is my understanding that the use of magic tools is more common in other countries, as they allow anyone to join the battle. Without magic tools, how do you expect them to fight monsters, let alone the demon king?” the second princess asked.

“Certainly, knowing how to use magic tools is important. However, a strong foundation allows one to use them most efficiently.”

“I understand that, but would it not be best to at least introduce the subject to them? If it is inevitable that the heroes will need to use them, I believe it would be wisest if they were furnished with some basic knowledge on the subject. I will leave specific instructions on their usage to you, but perhaps we can begin to introduce magic tools during our lectures.”

“Magic tools are a great boon to the user, but this can also cause people to be overly reliant on them. To avoid this, it is best to thoroughly train them such that they develop the correct mindset regarding their use.”

To this, the second princess had no response. Looking her in the eyes, Aegiana let out a small sigh.

“Second Princess, neither you nor your sister have anything to worry about. It is my duty to train them. You are already contributing greatly to their development with your lectures. Please leave all else to me.”

“I understand. I apologize for doubting one such as you, who bears the title of ‘Humanity’s Mightiest.’ Please forgive me for my baseless assumptions.” The second princess bowed her head, then raised it again with her masklike smile firmly in place.

“Second Princess... You no longer smile like you used to, do you?”

“Why, I do believe that I’m smiling at this very moment. Good night.”

“Please wait!” As the second princess began to take her leave, the knight captain called out to her. “What do you think of Her Majesty?”

“What a silly question to ask. Her Majesty is a most talented and popular woman, with both strong convictions and sound reasoning. She is a simply wonderful individual, perfectly suited for the thron—”

“Are those your true thoughts?!” There was sorrow in Aegiana’s words, but the second princess merely continued to smile.

“What do you mean by that, Captain?” said the second princess. “Please be careful when it comes to words that may be taken as disparaging Her Majesty, lest you be charged with lèse-majesté. You never know who might be listening.”

“I understand...”

The second princess turned once more and returned the way she had come.

“Second Princess... Lady Ariya. You needn’t worry so,” whispered the knight captain, as she sorrowfully watched the second princess disappear around the corner.

◇

It had been two weeks since I was summoned to this world. The physical training of the three heroes was going well, and since Ryuto seemed to have some affinity with the sword, he’d been getting sword lessons too. They really were heroes. The War Maiden Battalion was no longer a match for them, so the knight captain had to take them on herself.

Apparently, since magic users typically carried staffs with them, Tamaki was learning how to fight with one. However, I’d thought magic users only used their staffs for spells, not physical attacks. Tamaki = meathead, confirmed?

Aoi, for her part, was learning how to use a bow. Usually you’d want a tank to defend archers while they were firing their arrows, but a barrier user like her didn’t need one.

So this was their party: Ryuto, the close-combat expert; Tamaki, both a ranged DPS and a close-combat fighter; and Aoi, who could provide AOE ranged defensive support. Overall, their party composition was fairly balanced.

And then, there was me…who had finally begun martial arts training three days ago, while continuing with my usual strength training. Instead of swordsmanship, I was instructed in how to wield and throw a dagger, stealth, and trap-defusing techniques. They were really shoehorning me into the scout class, which made sense as that would allow me to put my Detect ability to full use.

According to the captain, I was fairly dexterous, so she decided to try to teach me every scout technique she knew. If I fell asleep during training, she smacked me awake. This happened so often that it may as well have been a part of the training itself.

When nighttime rolled around, I once again went out to practice using my Skills. Holding a knife in my hand, I aimed it at a tree branch from below. I was able to freely change the trajectory of the knife while it was in flight, and then at the end of it all, pierce my target with it.

Every night, I came to this field to train my Skills. So far, I'd acquired and had continued to practice Throwing Arts, Swordsmanship, Stealth, and Dagger Arts. Among these Skills, I'd put most of my focus on Swordsmanship and Throwing Arts. As the name implied, Throwing Arts allowed me to throw things, namely daggers.

I approached the tree that I'd been using as target practice and pulled out the wooden knife that was embedded in a branch. Even if it was the use of dark magic that had allowed me to do it, the fact that it was even possible for me to use a wooden knife to pierce a tree could not be ignored.

Throwing Arts had great synergy with my dark magic. I could use a combination of Conqueror and Puppet Master to adjust the trajectory of the knife as it flew through the air. But that wasn't enough to allow it to pierce a tree. If I added my "Throwing Arts" ability, though, I could give it some initial momentum—meaning that the knife's original kinetic vector was left intact, and only its flight path was altered by Puppet Master. Since the kinetic energy of the initial throw was preserved by Conqueror, the knife could pierce through its target. In short, I'd gained a long-range attack.

The Skills I had learned were all very useful, but during the day, I wasn't able to use the majority of them, nor could I gain any new ones. I began to wish that I could raise my vampirism level so I could better deal with the thorn in my side that was Contempt for the Sun God.

Either way, I'd finished training my Skills for the day, so it was time to raise my level. I searched through my Shadow Storage for a certain tool before moving to the usual forest.

I submerged myself in the shadow of a tree with Shadow Walk, then used Stealth to conceal my breathing. Unfortunately, since the depth of the shadow depended on the amount of mana the object possessed, I felt as though I had been shut inside a coffin. There wasn't much I could do about it, though, so there was little sense in complaining.

After a few minutes, Detect reacted to something. In all likelihood, it was that one Kecho. Completely unaware of my presence, it began pecking nonchalantly at a fruit dangling from the tree. As it inched closer to the shadow I was hiding in, I pulled a tool out of my own shadow, then flung it at the Kecho. With the use of Conqueror and Puppet Master, I fine-tuned the tool's movements, perfectly trapping the Kecho.

The Kecho let out a piercing screech that rang out across the area. Allowing that to continue might attract other monsters, which meant I was in a race against time. Looking into the eyes of the Kecho, I used the subjugation spell within my Eye of Sigils, which I'd switched to earlier, to hypnotize it, immediately neutralizing it. Of course, it wasn't dead—just enthralled by my high-level spell. If left alone, it'd probably stay like that for another day or so.

Detect had sensed that its scream had attracted other monsters, so I picked up the Kecho and began to run away. Weaving through the forest, I used Detect to make sure that I avoided any unwanted encounters until I reached a shadow that I could immerse myself in.

Finally safe, I could feed. I bit into the long neck of the Kecho and began sucking its blood, fueling my vampirism.

My overall plan was very simple: I captured monsters in a net, immobilized them with my hypnosis, and then drank their blood in a safe location. My hope was that by drinking enough blood to kill them, I could level up and raise my stats as well as my overall vampirism level. The net I used this time was specially made by me.

```
Black-String Net (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 15000 Dells / Abilities: Shadow Hardening
A lightweight and flexible net made with black strings. Strong
and wiry, it cannot be broken.
```

To create it, I used the following materials:

```
Black Strings (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / 5000 Dells / Abilities: Shadow Hardening
Strings infused with dark magic. They are sturdy and will not
snap, no matter what. The strings are very thin and are as soft
and light as silk.
```

Both of these had been created with Armament Craft, which meant that the net was considered a real weapon. It had never crossed my mind that

strings could be weapons. Well, maybe in a fantasy setting... *Oh wait, this* is *a fantasy setting.* Unlike the strings in fantasy worlds, though, the ones I'd made couldn't slice through skin and bone—they were just normal strings. Also...as usual, I hypnotized Nala to get her to bring me the strings. *I am* so *sorry about this...*

I'd finished draining the Kecho's blood. It had a very gamy taste to it, but perhaps because of my vampirism, I didn't dislike it.

In any case, it seemed like I'd leveled up, so I decided to check my stats.

```
Inori Takafuji / Demon (Vampire — Baron-Class) / Lv. 5
HP: 1351/1351(+400+120) / MP: 10445/12067(+4000+0)
STR: 1507(+400+133) / VIT: 1457(400+89) / DEX: 1403(+4000+60)
AGI: 1625(+400+149) / INT: 3356(+800+0)
Unique Skills: [Growth Boost] [5x Exp Multiplier] [½ Required
Exp] [Eye of True Sight] [Eye of Sigils] [Contempt for the Sun
God] [Vampirism]
[Baron-Class Authority] [Skill Pilfer] [True Dark Magic]
[Armament Craft] [Detect] [Level Up] [Skill Acquisition]
General Skills: [Swordsmanship Lv. 5] [Stealth Lv. 3] [Throwing
Arts Lv. 2] [Dagger Arts Lv. 1] [Dropkick Lv. 4]
Titles: Indomitable Soul, Involved Against Will
```

Though I'd only begun trying to raise my level a few days ago, I'd already leveled up four times, and my stats had risen accordingly. My MP had gone up by a thousand points each level, while the rest of my stats rose by a hundred or so.

Drinking the blood of my target gave me a stat boost at a ratio of about one to a hundred. If my HP or MP weren't full, it instead healed me at a ratio of one to one.

Once the Kecho's blood was drained, Skill Pilfer activated, and it looked like this time I received...Dropkick. *What the heck is that? Is that all you got, Kecho?* I also received the Kecho's memories...but the memories of a birdbrain weren't very helpful. If anything, they were kind of annoying.

I stored the Kecho's corpse in my shadow, then returned to lying in wait for my next prey. Despite my proximity to the castle, there were quite a number of monsters in this area. I immediately got a hit with Detect...and lo and behold, it was yet another Kecho. *Look, man, I know that they're* the *big item in this country...but they're, like, freakin' everywhere!*

Regardless, I continued hunting Kecho until the sun started to rise, signaling the end of my leveling up. At that point, I used teleportation to go back to my room. It was all part of my nightly routine, of course.

"Good morning. Rise and shine," Nala said, rousing me from my fake sleep.

Naturally, I only hypnotized her when I needed to, or when I left the castle.

"Good morning," I said.

"How are you this morning? Once you're done with breakfast, please proceed as usual to the training hall for your martial arts lessons. Then, after lunch, you will resume your lectures and magical training."

This had been my schedule for the past two weeks: nonstop training. Not like there was anything to do around here besides train, anyway...

Nala began to leave, but then she turned, her eyes landing on the journal resting on top of my desk.

"Wanna read it?" I asked her.

"May I?"

"Well, as long as you're okay reading only two week's worth of content."

I passed Nala the few pages I'd written, and she began to read them immediately. I'd written them in the language of this world, so she wouldn't have had any difficulty getting through them. (Personally, I consider the fact that we could instantly speak their language as soon as we were summoned the biggest cheat of them all.)

"Hee hee..." Nala giggled to herself as she went through the pages.

I'd written with her in mind as the audience, so I hadn't included anything embarrassing. Even so, it was kinda awkward having someone read my journal.

After she finished, she put the papers back on my desk.

"How was it?" I asked.

"It was enjoyable! You have quite the talent for writing."

"Mm, I think I'm pretty average by my world's standards."

"Then the standard for education in your home world must be very high."

No, this world's is just really low...which is to be expected, since they're basically in the Middle Ages.

"Oh—I should mention that the bath is open today."

"Really? What's the occasion?"

I'd since learned that they didn't use baths because they lacked the mana to maintain them, but had something changed? I wasn't supposed to know that, though, so I needed to play dumb here.

"The three heroes asked the first princess about it, and it appears to have inspired her to prepare a bath just for today."

"That should be fun."

My first bath after two whole weeks. I couldn't wait!

"Well, I'm gonna head to breakfast," I told her.

"Have a good day!"

I exited my room, leaving Nala to make my bed. Unfortunately, she couldn't join me for breakfast—as the maids got up very early, they had already eaten. She gave me a happy wave when I glanced back at her, so I returned the gesture and then headed towards the dining hall.

Now that I thought about it, over the past two weeks, I'd hypnotized Nala a decent number of times. Because of that, I'd been able to learn more about Sensei—or rather, the second princess. Here's what I'd figured out so far...

◇

The Rising Sun Kingdom was a country built around its queen. Each queen would give birth to a daughter, and then, when her time came, that daughter would inherit the throne and continue the tradition. For that reason, the queen had her own harem. This included her legal husband, the regent king, and all her consorts. Since this system revolved around the ability of a single queen to bear children, the royal family generally wasn't that large.

For many years, the reigning queen had been barren, and then disease had struck the royal family, causing several members to pass away. At that rate, it seemed inevitable that the next member of the royal family with witch's blood would take over—in this case, a distant relative, a certain duke's daughter. This was, after all, a country that placed great emphasis on the amount of royal blood that flowed through one's veins.

In order to avoid this dilution of their royal blood, nineteen years ago, the queen had gotten her younger brother, the king, to take a duke's daughter as a concubine. The girl that resulted from this union was named Ariya, which meant "she who will inherit the throne." In order for her to become a proper princess, she had been whisked away from her birth mother at a young age and put into rigorous training.

Shackled to her fate, she had been subjected to the most thorough training. Fortunately for her, she was a genius. Her magic may have been weaker than most, but she sucked up everything she was taught like a sponge. And even through all this adversity, she had still found a way to genuinely smile. She sometimes offered up her opinions on her parents' rule. Once, she had even managed to defeat a noble boy the same age as her. Even then, her innocent smile had not faded.

When Ariya turned seven and was officially named the first princess, she had thought she was the happiest girl in the world...but then the queen was blessed with a daughter.

The girl was named Amanda, which meant "she who is loved." She was more adept at magic than her sister, and the queen doted heavily on her—for she was the daughter the queen had wanted for so long.

Since it was inevitable that Amanda would become the first princess, a commensurate amount of pressure was placed on her, and she was trained in all sorts of subjects. In contrast, far less emphasis was placed on Ariya's education, which became more like brainwashing. She was taught to be subservient, modest, and raised in the kingdom's image of an ideal figurehead.

When Amanda turned seven, the title of First Princess was ripped from Ariya and given to her sister instead, leaving Ariya with the title of Second

Princess. At that time, she was fourteen years old—an adult by the standards of this country. From that point onwards, she was trained to be a wife and a tool for political marriage—and there was no longer a trace of her genuine smile. All that was left was a puppet princess.

However, they were unable to find any suitors for her. Due to her age and the complicated situation of the throne, as well as her unnatural and puppetlike behavior, she wasn't very popular.

The day that she turned eighteen was the day that she became too old to be used. Discarded by the queen, she was little but a doll trapped within the castle walls, doomed to do nothing but repeat the same actions day after day after day.

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So that's how she got the title of "Princess of Tragedy." *Well, some prince charming on a white horse should come and save her, 'cause it ain't gonna be me.* Due to this history, there appeared to be some factions among the servants, and Nala was one of the few individuals who was on the second princess's side. It kinda made sense that she would be, since she was the one who had told me Ariya's side of the story.

Apart from that, I had tried to ask about why the country was in such a bad financial spot, but I couldn't get much information out of her. It seemed that the exact reason had been covered up, but the rumor among the retainers was that the queen's mana reserves had been exhausted. Parts of the organizations in both the castle and the kingdom at large had been diverted to provide the queen with mana.

It was hard to be certain, but it was possible that the witch's blood had become diluted, growing weaker with each generation. If the queen was diverting resources to herself, that didn't leave much for the other organizations that needed mana to function, crippling them. Essentially, the kingdom was in a financial crisis due to poor production and high taxes. Then, due to a lack of manpower, there were fewer people to maintain public order and perform the upkeep of the castle.

The reason they had summoned us was just as I'd guessed—it was for the reward they received from the Suzerain of the Federation Alliance. As a side note, the reason that so many members of the royal family had fallen ill was most likely due to marrying within the family, which had left their immune systems weak.

"Please wake up, Inori."

I was awoken from my good nap by the second princess—Sensei. Sadly, this class had pretty much turned into nap time for me. As long as I memorized what she wrote on the board with my photographic memory, there was barely any point to me being here. But still, like clockwork, she'd wake me up and give me a tongue-lashing. *Just like a puppet princess.* This was our daily routine…or so I thought, but for some reason she continued to scold me.

“Knowledge is crucial in life. You will have nothing if you sleep through everything.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah.” This is rare. She’s lecturing me.

“It seems that you’ve been learning how to use stealth and daggers.”

“Oh—were you watching me again?”

Ever since she had come with the first princess to watch us that one time, she had continued to make a daily appearance. She might have been trying to be discreet about it, but there was no hiding from my Detect Skill.

“Unfortunately, you don’t seem to have any talent for magic, but you do seem proficient with daggers and stealth.”

“I’m nothin’ special. Ryuto and the other heroes are leagues ahead of me.”

Apparently, I could barely use any of the magic from this world—not even the simplest spells that most people could use. It seemed that such a lack of magic ability was rare.

“Do you truly think that the knight captain, as busy as she is, would spend so much time training you if she didn’t see some potential in you?”

“Eh, I’m just the freebie that came bundled with the three heroes,” I said, brushing off her question.

This was probably the first time that the two of us had talked this much…and I was already pretty over it. With a sigh, I gave her a discontented look and asked her a question of my own.

“What’s your point?”

“You have the potential to grow stronger, so stop sleeping and put in a little effort. Even if you are unable to use magic, you might be able to find a way to deal with it if you possess the knowledge. It’s not a waste of time to apply yourself.”

Oh, she has a point. I could be thinking of strategies for dealing with magic. Even if I looked through spell books, there’d be parts of spells that I wouldn’t understand without actually seeing them.

“Well, it’s a little late for me to apply myself, don’t you think?”

“All right then. Follow me.” She suddenly stood up.

“Huh?”

“There’s been a change of plans. We’re going to have a special class right now.”

“Oh, so this is a special magic training room?”

“Yes. This is where magic training typically happens.”

The room—or rather, arena—that she’d brought me to was very large and had thick walls. There were no windows, and my Detect Skill told me that the walls were packed with mana. I had no clue what she had planned for me in this room… Torture, maybe? Nah, no way.

She shut the door behind us, and absolute silence fell. If I couldn’t hear anything outside of this room even with Detect, it must have meant that the room was magically soundproofed.

“This room is used to practice Light Magic, such as Flare, and Wind Magic, such as Soundquake. The former produces very intense light, and the latter produces a very loud sound, both in order to disorient the enemy. These spells were devised by the previous hero.”

I hadn’t known that kind of magic existed. Was the hero who had come up with those spells from my world? It seemed as though they’d taken inspiration from flash-bangs and concussion grenades. But that still didn’t explain why we’d come to this room in the first place.

“Due to the strength of the soundproofing of this room, there is no way for anyone not currently present to see what is happening inside. None can listen in or observe us.”

Ah, now I see. Just in case, I checked beyond the walls using my Eye of True Sight, and it seemed that there really was nobody trying to listen or watch us. Most likely, she wanted to speak to me in private. But hey, I was alone with a princess. If I tried to have my way with her, nobody would be the wiser…not that I would do such a thing.

“I’m surprised you were able to get this room on such short notice.”

“I borrowed it under the pretense of teaching special magic, outside of simple offensive spells. Of course, I was advised to at least bring a guard or two, but I was able to convince them that I’d be safe with just my own magic.”

I guessed that stories of my powerlessness had already spread. She wasn’t wrong, though. Without my Eye of Sigils, I’d probably lose.

“Don’t you find that pathetic, though?”

“What?”

“Despite being a hero, everyone sees you as a weakling. Don’t you find that pathetic?”

Uh, well…I mean, you’re a genius, and also I’m not a hero—I just got caught up in all of this. I was seriously beginning to doubt that she was as “puppety” as her title suggested. At the very least, right now, she wasn’t following a script or anything. She was clearly speaking her mind.

“There’s been a rumor among the nobles that, at this rate, you will be expelled from the castle. Her Majesty is of the opinion that if you’re incompetent and not even putting in any effort, then there is no obligation for them to take care of you any longer. The king has prolonged your stay here by backing you up, but with the way things are going, he’s only delaying the inevitable.”

Oh, yikes. It hadn’t occurred to me that things had taken such a drastic turn. Though regardless of whether I was putting in effort or not, I would’ve thought that they’d want to keep me for my Divine Blessing, to prevent anyone else from having it. But maybe that was an assumption I’d made. Or perhaps they had some kind of spell that could defend against it?

“Personally, I am of the opinion that they are treating you unjustly. You have a magnificent Divine Blessing… However, I cannot deny that you make it hard to stand by you with your attitude. The only amazing part of you is

the Divine Blessing you possess, while you as an individual insist on putting no effort into bettering yourself. I believe that if they expel you from the castle as you are now, you will surely perish. Monsters are not to be taken lightly, after all."

I couldn't have agreed more. At night, I may have stood a chance, but I'd be a goner if I was attacked in the daytime.

"There is nothing holding you back. I believe that you can achieve anything if you try. Why don't you at least put your best foot forward in your training and studies, and shape up a little?" Gone was her usual empty smile, and in its place were a pair of very serious eyes, glaring at me.

"I'm not a hero like those three," I protested, "nor am I a genius like you. I'm just a normal human being."

"Even so, that's no reason to give up. It would seem to me that you're purposely shirking hard work in order to avoid embarrassment." Thus began her conjecture. "All four of you were normal humans in your previous world, were you not? But then, once you were summoned, a chasm opened up between you and the other three. Though your starting point should have been the same, try as you might, you'd never catch up to them—in fact, the gap between you would only grow larger. You're ashamed of that, so you're not even trying, and all so you can have an excuse. Am I wrong?"

Ashamed? Don't make me laugh. Pride, boredom, and shame... For me, such concepts don't exist. This is all in her head. Admittedly, though, I couldn't blame her for thinking that way, being on the outside looking in.

"I believe that you are stifling your own potential, that you are averting your eyes from the truth, and that you are unable to see your own worth. You ignore the fact that effort will get you somewhere and have chosen to give up instead."

"Even if what you say is true, why do you insist on helping me?"

"I simply cannot leave you alone. I am your teacher and your mentor in life."

"Look, just leave me alone. Despite what it looks like, I *am* trying my best. It might look like I'm slacking off, but this is the best I can do. Don't pin your hopes on me. Anyway, we done here?" Not even waiting for her response, I turned and began to walk away.

Even if she wanted me to try harder, I was so damn sleepy from my vampirism that I hardly had a choice. I really was trying my best, so what else was I supposed to do? I wasn't about to let someone who knew nothing about my situation lecture me. Also, not gonna lie, it felt pretty great being scolded by her like this...but I doubted it earned me any points with her.

Now that we were done, I could finally turn my attention to the highlight of the day—the bath! Oh, how nice it'd be to take my first bath in two weeks! Ending class early meant I could be the first to get in the bat—

But just as I was thinking that, something struck me in the ass, and the next moment I found myself flung against one of the thick walls of the room. I'd seen the attack coming, but with my stats at the moment, I couldn't

dodge it. Plus, even though I had seen it coming, it had still been a surprise attack, so it had caught me off guard. The whole series of events had left me dazed.

The Puppet Princess, who'd magnificently landed a Muay Thai-esque teep kick on me, lowered her leg and exhaled.

"I was trying to be nice to you, and somehow you *still* find a way to be a lazy turd?! Straighten up!" Looking down at me, she pelted me with verbal abuse. There wasn't a shred of her puppet persona left. She was just a lone, noble-minded woman. "What are you giving up for?! Why do you turn those pessimistic eyes on me?! Don't be so full of yourself! Were you not a normal person? Did you not live as a normal person, crawling on the ground through mud and grime?! Just how much shame have you accrued in your lifetime?!" She said all this in a single breath. Then, with a sharp inhale, she put one hand on her hip. "You aren't tied to anything like I am—you can still do something by yourself. Show me how you live no matter how unflattering it looks! It could hardly be worse than how you are right now!" For an instant, she looked sad, but then her expression hardened as she glared straight at me.

My ass still hurt. Certain that it was starting to bruise, I began to rub it, but then… "Ha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha ha!" …I couldn't hold back my laughter.

"What are you laughing about? How very off-putting."

How couldn't I laugh? She wasn't a puppet princess at all! She was merely playing the fool in order to deceive everyone around her. And she got me good. She played the role of an emotionless, tragic princess who could endure anything to protect herself. Just like me, she put up a front to avoid being hurt. She had such a strong spirit! Out of all the women I had met during my "travels," she was the most charming. How can I put this? She was the…

"Absolute best girl."

"Wha? Trying to woo me now, are you?"

Nah, that's not it. In a world with no love, no future, and no freedom, there's still a woman who can make a face like you. I didn't just want to date this woman—I wanted to marry her. I would've liked to be the husband of this literal ass-kicking woman.

"To be honest, I underestimated you. I didn't think you were so strong."

"Me? Strong…?" Confusion appeared on her face. "I'm not strong. If I were, I wouldn't be in the position that I'm in now."

"I don't really know your specific circumstances, but I do think you're strong."

"Well, I'm not. I wanted to be, but I wasn't able to become strong. And because you can actually become strong, I'm jealous of you, but…" She smiled weakly, then went on. "Perhaps I was the one who underestimated you. For some reason, you seem very strong right now."

"Don't worry. I might keep falling asleep in your class…but I'm more attached to staying alive than anyone else."

“I suppose that it was a waste of effort, saying all that. It was myself I was competing with.”

“Nah, you’re good. Also, I didn’t know about the plans to kick me out of the castle. Kinda good to know…but I’m not gonna thank you. It’s not really my style.”

“I don’t need your gratitude. After all, I was only poking my nose where it didn’t belong,” she said, smiling as she waved me off. “But I would appreciate it if you stayed awake during class. Otherwise, it’s rather lonely…”

“I can’t make any promises, but if you happen to make the lesson more stimulating, I might be able to stay awake.”

“Please don’t make it sound like it’s my fault you’re falling asleep.” She let out a sigh, then moved to place her hands on the door.

That seemed to be the end of our conversation. I was sure that as soon as she left this room, she’d return to being the Puppet Princess…which meant that now was my last chance to tease her.

“By the way…when you kicked me, I caught a glimpse of them. White looks good on you.”

“D-Don’t be stupid!” Turning bright red, she kicked me again.

“Strange. I believe I had this bath prepared for the three *heroes*, so why are *you* trying to go in too?”

Just as I was getting pumped to jump into my first bath in two weeks, I was promptly stopped in my tracks by the cheeky first princess.

“He hails from the same homeland as us, First Princess, so he shares our fondness of baths. Would it be possible to treat him equally, as our fellow countryman?”

“No, Ryuto. The gap between him and you heroes is too large. Asking for equal treatment is absurd. He has only been allowed to reside in the castle because of our generosity. You should be grateful.”

That seemed to be enough to have Ryuto back down, because at that point he stopped pressing the matter.

“Furthermore,” the first princess continued, “the chancellor has returned from his trip, and it is our duty to ease his weariness from his travels. He will be entering the bath as well, so there will be no time for someone of your status to enter.”

If the chancellor had been on a trip for over a week, he must’ve traveled pretty far. No wonder I hadn’t met him yet.

“But if it’s time that’s the issue—”

“Don’t worry about it, Ryuto. I’m fine just getting wiped down like usual,” I said.

“B-But—”

“Hmph. Good. Know your place and be grateful to me.”

Don’t be so unreasonable. How am I supposed to thank you after all that? Ryuto tried to stop me, but I just went back to my room. Honestly,

though, I couldn't have been happier. I'd just been thinking up excuses so I wouldn't have to go into the bath. Her timing was seriously impeccable.

But why *didn't* I want to go into the bath after making such a big deal about it? First of all, I'd noticed that there were people secretly watching us. Secondly, the interior design resembled a public bathhouse, maybe according to our predecessors' preferences… And wouldn't you know it, there were a ton of mirrors in there! So, being a vampire, I might not be reflected in them. I still honestly had no clue whether that was true in this world, since I'd been doing my best to avoid mirrors, but I wouldn't be able to keep avoiding them if I took a bath right now.

So in the end, the first princess had pretty much thrown me a life raft. I *was* disappointed that I couldn't take a bath, but there wasn't really anything I could do about it. I just had to suck it up.

I closed the monster field guide I'd borrowed from Sensei, after having speed-read it with my Eye of True Vision in order to learn more about the vampires of this world. I'd discovered that vampires here were weak to mithril and not silver as I'd initially thought. Also, instead of crosses, they were weak to six-rayed stars. Each point of the star represented a different element—light, fire, water, wind, earth, and darkness—with the point representing darkness removed from depictions of it.

This symbol was well known in this world and most likely functioned as their version of the cross. Come to think of it, I don't think I've actually seen a cross in this world so far. I guess that makes sense, though, since Christianity doesn't exist here.

Vampires were also weak to other things with light attributes, but they weren't quite what I expected, so I made a mental note to be careful. My expulsion from the castle was still up in the air, so I wanted to do as much as I could to avoid pushing things further in that direction. There was still a lot of information I was hoping to learn from their books, and it was definitely dangerous for me to be out in the world by myself, especially with little knowledge of magic tools. Supposedly it was possible for people to fight monsters with these tools, but for some reason, the knight captain refused to teach me about their usage.

So the question was: what should I do to avoid being kicked out of the castle? Thinking logically, I needed a way to demonstrate the usefulness of Detect. Perhaps I could accompany someone to a dungeon and show them how quickly I could scout it out? But there didn't seem to be any dungeon exploration on our schedule for a while. I could work in the castle as a servant, but there was no way I was gonna settle down permanently in this financially distraught country. That meant that my only other option was asking either the captain or the second princess to put in a good word for me, since they had more sway with the first princess…possibly even more than the heroes.

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“That may be difficult,” the knight captain said with a frown.

I’d decided to address the issue with her directly after training had concluded. I asked her if she could spare some time and speak with me in a reception room.

“Not to gas myself up, but I have a pretty useful ability. I know I haven’t really shown much motivation during training, but—”

“No, you misunderstand me. I don’t mean that it’d be difficult for you. In the first place, my appraisal of your value is not low.”

“Oh?”

“If anything, I’d like to have your ability for the knights. I believe you’d be a great boon to our forces, whether we’re in a dungeon or fighting the demon king.”

Well, this was surprising. *Is it rude to feel that way?* She’d always given me such a tough time in training that I had figured she didn’t think I was much of an asset, but it seemed that I was wrong. I guess if she’d really thought I was useless, she would’ve given up on me right away. The fact that she was still working me hard after two weeks was precisely because she thought I had potential.

“The reason I said that may be difficult was because I don’t have the right to overturn your potential expulsion. I’ve already voiced my disapproval of that course of action, but…well, I suppose you can guess the rest, can’t you?”

Oh, so she’s been on my side.

“If Her Majesty was the only one who wanted to expel you, there might be more that I could do, but there were already people strongly opposed to summoning heroes to begin with. Now, those same people are very insistent on your expulsion.”

Was it okay for her to tell me that?

“Keep that to yourself,” she added.

Oh, so it wasn’t.

“Would it be possible to convince them?”

“I would’ve tried if I thought there was a chance, but…” She seemed to fall deep into thought before placing her lips to the teacup that held her black tea. Then she spoke. “Would you like to enlist as a knight, Inori?”

“A knight?”

“Yes. Your ability is most useful in battle. You’d no longer be an ‘extraneous’ hero. You’d be able to walk on your own two feet as a warrior and work for the country. I’m sure this would be acceptable to the chancellor as well.”

So that must have meant that the party opposed to the summonings was the chancellor. *Hey, aren’t you a little too loose-lipped?* Enlisting as a knight meant that I’d be shackled to the kingdom, though, so I wasn’t completely sold on the idea.

“I…don’t think I can make a decision about that just yet.”

“I understand. But please come to me when you have no one else to turn to.”

“By that, do you mean when I’ve been expelled?”

“Who knows?” Looking away from me, she instead focused her eyes on something far beyond the window.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

If she was willing to take me in even after I’d been expelled, it must have meant that she really valued my ability. Accepting someone who’d been expelled from the castle into the knights was probably the nuclear option. Or maybe there was another purpose behind her offer?

“By the way, Inori, are you not going to drink the tea I made?”

“Huh? O-Oh, sorry! Thanks for the tea!”

I’d completely forgotten that when I sat down, she’d brought out tea for us. I was so busy talking about the matter of my expulsion that it had slipped my mind. That was rather discourteous of me. *She’s being so guileless. It’s throwing me off.* I began to sip the tea, which was now slightly cold.

“How is it?”

“It’s good…I think.”

I wasn’t really knowledgeable about tea in the first place, let alone the tea of this world. All I could do was try to say something polite.

“The tea leaves have some mana in them. It helps to relax you and lessen your muscle fatigue. It’s perfect to consume after training.”

“Oh, really?”

Was this supposed to be some kind of dig at me because I didn’t take my training seriously?

“Ah, I apologize. I did not mean to slight you with my words. For a layman, your training is quite difficult. Think of this as a reward.”

“Uh…”

“Also, I do not particularly blame you for slacking off. Everyone sets a different pace for their training. It can be counterproductive to force someone into a regimen that isn’t right for them. The reason I’ve been so hard on you is because I am running out of options. I truly am sorry.”

You know, it’s a little hard to react to such a genuine apology…

“I don’t really resent you for working me as hard as you do,” I said. “If you didn’t scold me, I probably wouldn’t train at all.”

In fact, I’d probably spend the time sleeping, which would be kinda bad because I need to keep an eye on Ryuto and the others’ training. At night, I referenced what I’d seen with Photographic Memory to learn Skills, but there’d be no memories to learn from if I’d spent the whole time asleep.

“Oh? Then perhaps I should get serious and work you even harder.”

“Huh?” Wait, you mean you haven’t been serious this whole time? I might have just dug my own grave.

As she watched me cradle my head in horror, she let out a laugh. “Well, all jokes aside—when it comes to your expulsion, if there’s anything I can

assist you with, do not hesitate to inform me. However, please understand that, considering my position, there is a limit to what I can do."

"That's more than enough for me," I said. "I'll be in touch if I need anything."

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In this white space that seemed to stretch on endlessly—a space void of any malice and which exceeded the limits of human understanding—a single beach umbrella extended from the ground, shading a lounge chair in which a beautiful woman was relaxing. Her limbs and curves were mesmerizing, and her glistening skin was wrapped in a white raiment. Her sparkling hair seemed to flow in an imaginary wind. Looking at her was almost like viewing a painting.

This woman—the goddess of summonings—stood up from her chair and exhaled. In the next second, both the parasol and the chair were bathed in light, then vanished.

"The first summoning in a while… Wait, no, this is how things usually go. *He* was just abnormal."

She recalled the ruckus that Inori Takafuji had caused.

"It looks like the next summon is…also from Japan. Is that country cursed or something? Their citizens are being summoned far too much."

Recently, those who had been summoned were overwhelmingly from Japan. When a summoning takes place, it's common for each world to have a specific location from which individuals are more likely to be drawn. Plus, since Japan had a good affinity with other worlds, it might have been a hot spot for summoning. Inori Takafuji, however, was a complete outlier. What had happened with him had never happened before. Ultimately, he'd ended up being summoned seven times, and the strength of his soul had become quite the topic of discussion among the greater gods.

"Word of him has already reached the ears of the primordial god… Not that it matters, or anything. Oh? It would seem that the one being summoned currently will be sent to the same world as Inori. The barrier for souls to be summoned to the Rising Sun Kingdom is low, so most would be summoned there immediately without passing through this space first. He must have a fairly strong soul."

After going over all the information, she headed towards where the summoning circle was to appear. Then, once the person being summoned arrived, she'd simply explain the situation to him. The goddess did not decide the gift that would be received; an appropriate gift was automatically bestowed on them depending on what paired best with their soul.

In the past, she'd been able to choose, but her superior, the primordial god, had decided that it would be more fun if their gifts were instead selected automatically. As the goddess of summonings, it was her duty to oversee the safe transportation of souls to the worlds they were summoned to. Though this may have sounded simple, it was only something that could

be handled by a greater god. In fact, she was the second most important god.

Now, a single human appeared before her in a flash of purple light that emanated from the summoning circle at his feet.

“Whoa, what’s goin’ on?!”

A handsome but frivolous-looking guy with dyed-blond hair had arrived.

“Be at ease. I am what you would call a goddess. You are currently in the space between worlds.” As she spoke to him in her clear and alluring voice, the guy became aware of her. At once, his face went red.

Though the goddess wore a smile, she sighed internally. Every guy who was summoned here got the same lovestruck expression on his face. All those enthralled looks gave her no pleasure—they were merely a nuisance.

If anything, it was the cool yet still somehow passionate way that Inori had eyed her that excited her. She was, however, not a masochist. A being of her status was not allowed to possess those kinds of sexual preferences.

It would have been a waste of time to leave the one who had been summoned in his trance, so the goddess went on in calm tones. “Allow me to explain your current situation. You—”

“Ma—”

“Ma?” The goddess was confused by this interjection.

The guy stayed frozen for a few long moments, his face still bright red, before clenching his hands into fists and letting his words fly. “Marry me!”

“No thank you.” It didn’t even take a second for her to reject him.

As viciously as she’d rejected him, however, she was confused by how those words had come to her so strongly, as if by reflex.

This was new. She’d never received a proposal before. Though, after thinking over what she’d said, she was convinced that she’d used the most effective response possible.

“I…knew you’d say no, but still…” Having been remorselessly shut down, the guy clutched at his heart in frustration. “I could never match up to your divine beauty. You are as dazzling as the night sky, as bright as the sun, and I am but a pebble lying on the side of the road. I know all of this, but…please, at least tell me why you don’t want to marry me!”

The goddess was both surprised and also turned off by his long-winded spiel.

This one’s a little…out there, isn’t he? “You’d…like a reason?”

“Is it because there’s a guy you already like?”

“Uh…” The goddess thought hard. “Yes, there is. He was summoned here just like you—an individual named Inori Takafuji. He appeared before me in this space as you have, and I fell in love with him at first sight.” Thus, the goddess successfully sold Inori down the river.

“Wh-What?!”

“However, if you become stronger than him, I may reconsider my feelings.”

“F-For real?! I’ll try super hard to become a guy worthy of you!”

“I will wait for your soul to surpass his in strength. He currently resides in the Rising Sun Kingdom.”

Secretly, the goddess thought to herself that there was no way that Inori would lose to this guy—especially considering the superhuman strength of Inori’s soul. Though the person standing in front of her may also have had a strong soul, it was nowhere near the level of Inori’s.

“Got it! I’m pretty confident in my strength!”

However, he did not know that physical strength had nothing to do with the strength of one’s soul. Suddenly, he was illuminated by a purple light coming from the summoning circle below his feet.

“Already?! Shoot! Okay, here’s the situation—you’ve been summoned to a different world to be a hero. Here’s a cheat!”

“Thanks for the simple explanation!” Those were the last words of the individual before he was summoned to his new world.

After a job sloppily done, the goddess let out a sigh. “Well, he seems very righteous and virtuous…but that doesn’t do much for the strength of his soul.” In the next instant, the goddess had re-manifested her lounge chair and parasol, lying down upon the former. “To have a strong soul is to be arrogant or greedy. It means to be the most selfish, messed-up, self-serving, exclusivist person no matter what world you are in. I’m curious what a guy like Inori will do when the world turns against him—especially with his self-serving nature, like the antithesis of justice itself, which looks to overthrow everything.”

The goddess wasn’t sure whether the feelings she harbored for Inori were attachment or simple curiosity. As an ultimate being, an absolute authority, the goddess did not understand love or human emotion. Therefore, she had no way of discerning what her own feelings were.

Regardless, the guy known as Masayoshi Date had been summoned to a country that neighbored the Rising Sun Kingdom.

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“Heroes from a neighboring country will be visiting?”

“Yes, they should arrive tomorrow,” the second princess, also known as Sensei, answered me.

The topic had come up while we were discussing tomorrow’s lecture, which would apparently be canceled along with my training so that people would be ready to welcome the heroes. Sensei was slated to make an appearance at this reception too.

“I didn’t know that was happening.”

“It makes sense that you weren’t notified, if you weren’t invited.”

Wow, so I’m being left out. I hadn’t been told about the party nor the fact that heroes would be visiting…which were both pretty important events. Maybe it was my fault for having recently stopped asking Nala about the daily agenda. Though why *would* I keep asking when it was always the same stuff? Wake up, eat, train, eat, go to class, eat, sleep… Rinse and repeat.

Anyway—so the heroes of a neighboring country were going to visit, huh? Up until now, the heroes I'd met (that is, Ryuto's group and my classmates) all had pretty decent characters, being both smart and realistic...but who knew about these guys. What if they had no sense of justice, or hated women, or were prone to misunderstandings, or were just dumb as bricks? I really hoped they wouldn't turn out to be like that. If they were, it'd be so annoying to deal with. *Please let them be normal people... Oh crap, did I just jinx myself?*

Now that three weeks had passed since I'd come here, I decided to check my stats again.

```
Inori Takafuji / Demon (Vampire — Baron-Class) / Lv. 8
HP: 2325/2325(+300+674) / MP: 15070/15070(+3000+3)
STR: 2487(+300+680) / VIT: 2233(+300+476) / DEX: 1961(+300+258)
AGI: 2711(+300+786) / INT: 3968(+600+12)
Unique Skills: [Growth Boost] [5x Exp Multiplier] [½ Required
Exp] [Eye of True Sight] [Eye of Sigils] [Contempt for the Sun
God] [Vampirism]
[Baron-Class Authority] [Skill Pilfer] [True Dark Magic]
[Armament Craft] [Detect] [Level Up] [Skill Acquisition]
General Skills: [Swordsmanship Lv. 5] [Stealth Lv. 5] [Throwing
Arts Lv. 5] [Dagger Arts Lv. 4] [Dropkick Lv. 10] [Swindler Lv.
1]
Titles: Indomitable Soul, Involved Against Will
```

Even if I'd been killing nothing but Kechos for the past week, I think I was more or less making this work. Not that I had a choice in the matter, seeing as they were the only monsters around. Because of all my hunting, though, I got the feeling that there were fewer of them around than usual.

Kecho chicks were this country's specialty, so was I hurting this country by thinning their numbers? *Well, whatever—they'll never figure out it's me, anyway.*

Now that I had the chance to get a good look, the stat boosts I received from Vampirism were crazy. They were way higher than what I got from normally leveling up. At this point, even if I didn't level up, I could probably get by doing nothing but drinking blood. My MP and INT shouldn't have risen from only slaying Kechos, but while I was hunting them, I had also taken out a small goblin nest.

There had supposedly been thirty or so of them, yet I didn't seem to have reaped too many benefits from taking them out. *I guess even in this world, goblins are small fry.* Still, goblins were supposed to be twice as strong as normal humans. *Just how weak are humans, anyway?!*

And then there was Dropkick at level ten. It showed no signs of going any higher than that, meaning that it capped at ten. I hadn't intended to,

but it seemed that I'd maxed out Dropkick. My other Skills apart from Swordsmanship were rising rather slowly. It was pretty hard, or rather annoying, to gain Skills the way I'd learned Swindler. For example, in order to get Trap Master, I had to actually disarm a trap. It wasn't nearly as simple as the process for gaining physical Skills.

So, what was I doing right now? Just lying on my bed alone, because of the party that was being held today. After all, they didn't want a nonhero like me there. The whole shitty situation had really pissed me off. It got me thinking that maybe I should just crash their party, yelling "Death to normies!"

But jokes aside, I understood why I hadn't been invited. If I had been, they'd have to explain how I got here—namely, they'd have to bring up the fact that the unexpected had happened, and someone who had nothing to do with the summoning at all had gotten roped in. There was absolutely no benefit to the kingdom making these abnormal circumstances public. It'd be bad if it encouraged the Empire to start sticking their nose into the kingdom's business too.

The windows of the building the party was being held in were closed, but the doors to the venue were left wide open. Although there were probably bigwigs from other countries here, shutting them in by closing the doors would have been the same as restraining them. That's why they had to leave the doors open, although they still had guards posted at the entrance. There were probably some who wanted to go outside for a change of scenery too. But it didn't matter to me whether the doors were open or closed. With my Omniscience, I could see everything.

I couldn't hear what was being discussed, but if I focused hard enough using my Eye of True Vision's Microscope, I could read lips to a certain extent. That being said, there was no way I could read the lips of everyone there at once, so I wasn't going to be able to gather that much information. I wondered why the windows were closed, though. I could sense a trace of magic in them, so maybe they were magic tools.
Appraisal.

```
Magic Windows (Creator: Hero Mage)
Quality: S+ / Value: 7800000 Dells
A magic tool created by the mage of the party of heroes. It can
reflect and divert a certain amount of magic. The source of its
power is the castle's jewel.
```

Holy crap, this magic tool is nuts. They must've kept the windows closed in order to prevent any magical sniping—they were effectively protected against any kind of long-range magic. *And what's with that value?!*

The party had even more servants present than usual, and much fancier food. The place looked amazing. *Aren't you guys in a financial and mana crisis? Can you really be splurging on all this stuff?* As much as I wanted to

point that out, though, Nala had told me under hypnosis that the parties themselves were the main cause of the kingdom's financial difficulties. Apparently, the queen's strategy for concealing the country's issues was to show off to other countries, regardless of how the king tried to talk her out of it. She was really putting the cart before the horse.

Now that I'd gotten a good look around, it was time to find the heroes. I used Omniscience to survey the room from the ceiling and spotted a rather conspicuous gathering of people. At the center of the group were the three heroes from the Rising Sun Kingdom, and then a different set of three people who, in all likelihood, were the three heroes from the other country.

Ryuto had a tuxedo on, while Tamaki and Aoi wore dresses. Seeing them dressed up like this really made it sink in just how good-looking the three of them were. The other trio consisted of two guys and one small-framed girl with black pigtails. (Did that hairstyle really exist in Japan too?) The girl seemed very proud as she puffed out her nonexistent chest. She had the same kind of aura as the first princess.

One of the guys had long black hair that covered his eyes. He kinda struck me as a recluse—out of place surrounded by all these attractive people. *Yeah, I think I can be friends with him.*

The other guy had blond hair. Was he a delinquent or something? Was it dyed? Somehow, he gave off a strong aura of being justice incarnate. *How about I just call you Justice?*

Deciding to Appraise them, I found out that the girl's name was Hikaru Aida, and the plain-looking guy was Yuichi Tanaka. Even his freakin' name was plain. Then there was the blond guy— *Ah, crap, I accidentally appraised the pig-faced noble next to him, whose name turned out to be Shutelk Glaiste. Man, I couldn't care less.*

Okay, let's try that again. The blond guy's name was Masayoshi Date. *Huh? Is this a joke? That's such a flashy name!* I knew that was how his name should be read in Japanese, but another way to read it was "Seigi Date," meaning "justice in appearance only." How'd he get such a hypocritical-sounding name? Just one glance at him was enough to tell me that he was absolutely the annoying type—the kind of guy that I shouldn't get involved with. *Wait, did I just jinx myself again? Oh well, whatever.*

According to his stats, he was maybe just a little bit behind Ryuto and the others. There must have been a one-week difference between when they were summoned and when we were summoned. Hikaru Aida's Divine Blessing was Light Magic, Yuichi Tanaka's was Note, and Masayoshi Date's was Swordsmanship. The only one I was curious about out of all of those was Note. Masayoshi Date's Swordsmanship was simple as far as Skills went, but strong.

It seemed that our heroes from the Rising Sun Kingdom had finished introducing themselves, and at that point, the blond guy began to look around the venue. Confused, the people around him tilted their heads curiously. Then he suddenly cornered Ryuto, which kicked up quite the fuss amongst the people around them. The king stepped in to try to calm things down, but the situation was quickly devolving into chaos.

I couldn't be sure what was going on, but somehow I had a feeling that, right now, Mr. Justice was trying to exact his namesake of justice. He was still yelling, so I decided to try to read his lips.

Wait a second. "Bring Inori Takafuji here"...?

"I challenge you to a duel!"

It seemed that Masayoshi Date wanted to face me and showed no signs of relenting, so they'd promised him that he could meet me after the party. I could already tell that this was going to be a huge headache.

"So...why, exactly, would you want to do that?"

"To prove that you are unworthy of the goddess's affection!"

Goddess? The only goddess I knew of was the one who I'd seen repeatedly over the course of my multiple summonings.

“I don’t think I follow you… What goddess are you talking about? I don’t have the slightest clue.”

“Don’t play dumb with me. You went to that blank space too, didn’t you? The goddess said that she fell in love with you at first sight, but that if I beat you, she might give me a chance!”

I still didn’t really have a clue what he was going on about, but nevertheless, I was beginning to understand the situation. Basically, the goddess had just shoved a huge pain in the ass my way. *All right. Next time I see you, you’re getting a good, hard smack.*

Of course, nobody else knew what was going on. And why would they? This guy had just suddenly started spouting garbage about a goddess. How was anyone supposed to understand? It made sense that they weren’t familiar with the goddess of summoning—the only goddesses that these people knew were the goddess of light, the goddess of water, the goddess of the world…and so on.

It didn’t seem as though any of the other heroes knew what was going on either, which meant that they’d probably never traveled to that white space themselves. I’d already had the feeling that Ryuto and the others hadn’t been there, but it seemed like this was also true for the other heroes, sans this guy. It was a huge pain that I was the only one who knew what was going on. Maybe I could just talk my way out of all this…

“I don’t really get it, but okay. I accept your challenge.”

“Well, I guess there’s something dependable about you after all.”

“P-Please wait!”

“Wait, Inori!”

Just as we’d both agreed to the duel, a bigwig from their country spoke out to try to stop him, while Ryuto tried to stop me.

“What if you were to get hurt? Please reconsider this!” said the VIP from their country.

“Shut up! My decision is made. Are you defying me? *Me*, a hero?!”

Wow, that’s some silly logic. Who cares if you’re a hero? He was acting as though his status was even higher than that of Ryuto and the others. *But why?* While I was trying to figure that out, Ryuto walked over to me.

“He has a strong Divine Blessing. You could get seriously injured. Don’t do this, Inori.”

“Shut up. My decision is made. Are you defying me? *Me*, a layman?!”

“What are you even saying, dude…?”

The tired look that Ryuto gave me, the way that Tamaki glared daggers at me—it showed the difference in how we were treated.

“All right, let’s do this. Where are your training grounds?”

“Sorry—I have one little request.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t have a Divine Blessing that helps me in combat, and I don’t really have any special physical traits.”

“So what?!”

“I’m at an obvious disadvantage if we fight one-on-one.”

“Like hell you are!”

Yep. Just what I thought he’d say. “With my huge handicap, this so-called ‘duel’ is just an excuse for you to give me a one-sided pummeling. If you’re okay with that, then…”

“What?!”

Ahh, yes. I do so love easily manipulated idiots like you. “I’d like to suggest different conditions for our duel. There’s a dungeon nearby that the knights use for training. How about…first person to defeat the boss on the first floor wins?”

I’d learned of this dungeon’s existence from the knight captain. The first floor should have been sufficiently difficult that newly summoned heroes wouldn’t be able to clear it easily. For some reason, though, they didn’t use the dungeon for hero training.

“So you have a Divine Blessing that gives you an advantage for dungeon exploration? Pretty lame of you to try to talk me into choosing a contest that puts you in a better position.”

“Should we do something else, then?”

“Nah. The dungeon’s no match for me and my blade.”

“Then it’s decided. Let’s keep this between the people here, though, so things don’t get too out of hand.”

The bigwig from Masayoshi’s country had a worried grimace on his face.

“Also, how about we each take one other person with us? It’ll help prevent either of us from getting seriously injured.”

Surely it’d take a load off everyone’s minds if we each had someone to watch over us as we went through the dungeon, instead of us simply duking it out with each other.

“Are you sure about this, Inori? Your abilities may be well suited for scouting, but there’s no way that you can beat the dungeon’s boss.”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan.” I smiled confidently at Ryuto to reassure him.

In the end, we decided that the competition would be held tomorrow, and Masayoshi Date left the hall with the rest of the people from his country.

Two days later, I was summoned to speak with the queen. She looked as heavily arrogant as the heavy makeup she had on. As she sat upon her throne, the queen of the Rising Sun Kingdom peered down at me as if I were little more than a dirty rag. Around the room, I spotted the knight captain, the first princess, and the three heroes. *I’m sure it’s obvious by now, but “two days later” means that today is the day after my competition with Masayoshi Date.* And apparently, that was the reason I was here.

“So, you’re Inori?” she said, in a rather extreme old-woman voice.

“Yep.”

“Explain your failure yesterday. Not only did you change the location of your contest with that person to the dungeon, but he then bested you by a large margin. Is anything I have said thus far inaccurate?”

“Nope, that’s precisely what happened.”

Fortunately for me, this country didn’t have any rules that stopped me from speaking with the queen directly. Just as she’d said, I’d completely lost yesterday. *But I mean…that guy’s way too strong! His swordplay is insane! He can probably give the knight captain a run for her money.* He had easily cut through all the small-fry monsters, hadn’t taken any damage from traps, and had then one-shotted the boss. He was obviously overpowered.

In contrast, long after he’d beaten the boss, I’d still gotten nowhere close to it, even after going over the two-hour time limit. It was clearer than day that I’d lost.

“Until now, out of respect for the king, who has faith in the value of your abilities, I’ve overlooked your laziness as well as your general ineptitude. But now, you’ve done harm to the entire kingdom. There is no reason for us to continue caring for an incompetent like yourself. I hereby expel you from this castle. Any objections?” Obviously, she was very angry.

What she’d asked me had been phrased as a question, but her mind was already made up. I took a look at the king, but his sad eyes told me that he couldn’t cover for me any longer.

“Your Majesty, I object.” Of course I’m gonna object.

“What?!”

All of a sudden, the room was abuzz with whispering.

“You speak of having done harm to this country, but what harm is that, exactly?”

“You lost the duel, did you not?”

“Yes, I did—but that is all. Does Her Majesty know what was at stake in this duel?”

“It is true. I have not heard anything about that.”

Once again, the room was filled with whispers. Up until this moment, Ryuto and the others had been trembling with frustration, but now they were trying to figure out what I was talking about.

“What we put on the line in this duel was our ‘dependability.’”

“You…what?” Gone was the rage from Her Majesty’s face, and taking its place was mere confusion.

“Whoever won the duel would be ‘the better man,’” I explained.

“Wait… That’s it?!”

“Yep.”

Traditionally, duels carried strong binding agreements. The terms were decided beforehand, and upon the resolution of the duel, whatever had been agreed upon was absolute. The terms were only applicable to those who had participated in the duel, but since the kingdom was my guardian, my loss was also the kingdom’s loss.

However, the terms of *our* duel weren't very clear. The only condition was what Masayoshi Date had said to kick everything off—in other words, who would make a more suitable partner for the goddess. In the first place, even if one of us were to be deemed unworthy, there was nothing stopping us from getting with her, so there was basically nothing binding about this duel. *Not that I want to get with her, anyway...*

"In addition, one of the terms was to keep the duel secret, and his presence here had already been concealed from the public. In other words, I do not believe that the results of this secret duel should have any effect on Your Majesty's reputation."

In the end, our "duel" had been nothing but a farce. There were no consequences for losing, and no rewards for winning.

The queen put her hand to her chin and groaned.

"Furthermore, the two hours that I spent in the dungeon after he'd won were not spent idly." With these words, I gave the knight captain a look.

I'd told her my plan ahead of time, so she was working in cahoots with me. We'd decided that when I gave her the signal by making eye contact with her, her subordinates would bring in a number of bags and set them down before the queen.

"Please, open them."

The queen looked suspicious, but when one of her retainers opened the bags, she changed her tune entirely.

"Th-This—"

"Since I knew I couldn't win the duel, I decided that I could at least bring some gifts back."

Within the bags were treasures of gold and silver, as well as various looted items. I'd accumulated all of these from the first floor of the dungeon, so they weren't particularly valuable, but I knew that both the queen and the first princess liked gold. They couldn't take their eyes off the gleaming spoils.

"These are the treasures I collected from the first floor. Using my Divine Blessing, Detect, it is but a simple matter for me to locate and collect treasure."

I couldn't really say that I had lost the duel, because in the first place, my objective hadn't been to beat him—it had been to go treasure hunting. This wasn't something I had planned, but as it turned out, inside the dungeon there was no concept of day or night, so I had been able to use my abilities without restrictions in order to accumulate all this treasure.

Probably, if I'd really wanted to, I could've reached the boss and beaten it before him too, but I didn't really care about winning the duel. My only objective was demonstrating my worth to the queen and the first princess. No matter how much I explained to them the value of my ability, they wouldn't believe it until they saw its value with their own eyes.

After that, the queen herself gave me permission to remain in the castle, but I was told to try harder in my training. As I left, I saw that the first

princess and queen were still ogling the treasure. *They really care about gold more than anything.* Off to the side, the king sighed.

When I returned to my room, I checked my stats. Swindler was still at level one, but I'd gained the title "Ham Actor." *Shut up, stats.*

Later, I was in the special magic training room with Sensei, who had taken off her Puppet Princess mask and was talking to me plainly.

"You are a very stubborn and unkind person, did you know that?" Sensei let out a sigh. "I feel so embarrassed that I was actually worried about you through all of this."

"I told you not to worry, didn't I?"

"Yes, but..." She paused briefly before continuing. "I didn't expect you to use the duel as a way to fight your expulsion."

"Yeah. Truth be told, your loose lips really saved me."

"There's a better, less disreputable way of describing what I did," she said, pouting.

It was pretty surprising to see her making any kind of expression besides her usual smile.

"I'm sure there was a better way to resolve this, though," she added. "What you did was essentially trickery."

"Yeah, it was. How else am I supposed to fight when I'm so weak? If you just take morality out of the equation, there's always a way around supposedly insurmountable obstacles."

"I see..." She gave me a weirdly cautious look of admiration.

"If you can't take the high road, take the low road. Actually, might as well just take the low road all the time. I'll do anything for my own sake."

"I think that things worked out because of your efforts, though."

"My efforts?" *What efforts?*

"Divine Blessings are certainly strong even without training them, but it takes a lot of work to be able to use them freely. The fact that you were able to use your Divine Blessing so easily in the dungeon, even though it was apparently your first time using it in a practical setting, means that you must actually be using it a fair bit. You may make it seem as if you're slacking off, but you're actually always putting in effort."

So close, and yet so far. I wasn't using it for the purpose of mastering it, but I *was* using it frequently. She's very sharp.

"I suppose lecturing you that one time was just needless meddling on my part. Thinking back to it is rather embarrassing."

"What'd you say to me again? Oh yeah—'Just how much shame have you accrued in your lifetime?!'"

The second princess did not reply.

"Then you also said something like, 'If you're a man, straighten up!' right?"

Once again, she was silent.

"Man, that kick hurt like hell."

“Please stop.” By this point she was bright red and crouched down, curled up into a ball.

God, this is fun. Teasing her in here is seriously fun!

“You really are unkind.” Through the crack between her knees, I caught a glimpse of tears in her eyes.

This might become a habit...

Well, with the problem of my expulsion out of the way, I once again made my way to the forest that same night. I was pretty tired of hunting Kechos, though. I took out a Black Wood Knife and used Puppet Master to throw it at a Kecho, piercing its slender neck deeply. It didn’t even have time to let out a scream before it died.

Recently, I’d begun straight-up killing them instead of capturing them and then draining their blood. The latter was something I only did when I felt like I had the time for it.

I’d grown pretty used to using True Dark Magic and Throwing Knives in tandem. I could insta-kill Kechos now, so I could probably do the same with the other weak monsters in the forest. At the very least, I had a fair bit of power at nighttime. The only thing now was to figure out what I was able to do in the daytime. I could probably try using magic tools to supplement my strength, but regrettably, I had absolutely no affinity for them, so that wasn’t an option I could really rely on.

“Hm?”

During my usual exploration, I noticed an area of strangeness while I was in the mountains. Detect didn’t pick anything up, but there was still something about the place that didn’t sit right with me. It had to have been an illusion or some kind of hallucination. I hadn’t had a chance to try it out yet, but this seemed like the perfect time to use Anti-Illusion.

As soon as I had activated the Skill, the strange forest around me distorted and then expanded, revealing a junglelike area dotted with stones and large trees. Apparently there was some kind of illusion at work here.

“Hm, what to do...?”

The safest choice would be to pretend I hadn’t seen anything, but I didn’t detect anything dangerous. There might have been some monsters in there, but they were only a little stronger than the Kechos. It was hard to get a good look at the area with Omniscience, though, because of all the walls, rocks, trees, and ivy in the way. Far-sight didn’t allow me to see much either, so overall, I had little way of knowing what awaited me within.

Then again, it was nighttime. With my cheat abilities at full power, I was at my strongest. In the worst case, I could teleport away, so perhaps I didn’t have to be too cautious. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? And if there were stronger enemies, that could help me level up. Not to mention I had my net, as well as countermeasures against stronger enemies.

All right, let’s do it. With that thought, I stepped towards the illusory space.

Chapter 2

Hello, dear readers. It's your favorite protagonist, Inori, reporting from the scene of the mysterious area that I entered. I'm sure you're wondering—what exactly have I wandered into? Well, to put it briefly, it's a hidden space.

The trees here had grown twisted like rope and, in some cases, intertwined with each other. The ivy that hung from their thick branches was so long that it touched the ground. A great many rocks jutted from the ground, all covered with dark green moss. Cliffs and waterfalls were scattered across the area without rhyme or reason. The place looked truly fantastical.

Now for the weather. It was very warm but not overly humid. If anything, the air in here felt crisp and almost refreshing. Furthermore, despite being an incredibly dense forest, there were absolutely no signs of any bugs or other animals whatsoever—except for a certain creature, which was, at the moment, causing the thicket in front of me to tremble.

As soon as I heard the low growl coming from its ashen, fur-covered body—with its pointed face, powerful jaws, and sharp teeth—I knew what it was: a wolf. *Ah, it's jumping at me! Down, boy!*

At this point, I quit pretending to narrate my experience here as if I were a newscaster and focused on throwing a net at the wolf that was charging at me. The moment it came into contact with the net, it became ensnared, curled up into a ball with its limbs entangled and unable to escape. However, it kept its inertia from its approach, so I made sure to sidestep it as it tumbled towards me, caught up in the net. As it passed, I looked into its eyes and cast hypnosis on it.

"Nice."

```
No Name / Lupine Monster (Gray Wolf)
HP: 1052/1052 / MP: 352/352 / STR: 956
VIT: 852 / DEX: 429 / AGI: 982 / INT: 651
Divine Blessing(s): None
Titles: None
```

After I finished draining the blood from the Gray Wolf, I left the shadow I'd been hiding in, and then used Detect to try to inspect the area. But no matter how much I tried, things didn't make any more sense. If anything, they only became more confusing. Coming to this place had been a mistake. I couldn't use Detect properly, and I was completely, utterly lost. It was no wonder that I'd begun to narrate my experiences in my head as a way of escaping the reality of the situation I'd found myself in.

It had taken me too long to realize that Detect wasn't working correctly. If I used Omniscience to look into the distance and understand the

topography of the area which lay before me, then perhaps I'd be able to tell the difference between illusion and reality by comparing what I saw with the results of using Detect. However, I decided against that because it sounded like a pain. When I'd entered, I'd assumed that using Anti-Illusion would dispel the entire illusion here, but that didn't seem to be the case.

In the end, Detect was a Divine Blessing of *this* world, which meant that someone must have devised some kind of strategy to combat it. I guess it was cocky of me to think that it would work anywhere.

I activated Stealth and continued to move through the forest, dodging the ivy, rocks, and branches in my way. It was like I was forging a trail through a jungle. At the very least, there was one thing I could be glad about—since Gray Wolves were stronger than Kechos, I'd gone up an entire level from killing that one. Still, though, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was about to run into a boss…and a strong one, at that. *But there's no way…right? I'd better not be jinxing myself again.*

However, I *was* in a place that was out of bounds. I wish I could've warned the me of ten or so minutes ago to be more cautious when entering. I wanted to be particularly careful not to mess up my dress shirt. It was the one article of clothing that I had from Japan. The reason I was wearing it now, and not my usual knight attire, was because the latter was being laundered after the time I'd spent in the dungeon, so this was my only other option.

"Hm? A light?"

From in between the twisted vines and leaves, I spotted a faint glow. I pushed through them and was met with a huge tree and an enormous, open space that wiped the dense forest I'd just been in clean from my mind. Slow-moving waterfalls fell from cliffs, pooling in a spring below. This space was even calmer and more refreshing than the forest had been.

"Ah… This sure looks like a boss area."

No matter how I looked at it, this was just the kind of place you'd find in a typical RPG, at the heart of a secret forest. *Hm. Okay. I was never here. Time to get the hell out of Dodge.*

"All right, let's just turn right back around, and…"

All at once, the trees, the forest, the ground, and everything else in the area flew past me—no, it was *me* that was blown backwards, and with incredible speed. I crashed back-first into a branch, all the wind knocked out of me.

When I'd tried turning to leave, out of the blue, a white haze had descended upon me. Before I knew it, I'd been launched into the air and slammed against a tree, crushing my spinal cord. At least, this is what my left eye saw.

Thanks to the abilities of my right eye, however, I witnessed the entire sequence of events, as well as the identity of the white mist, not to mention its huge body. Its gaze was sharp as it looked at its prey, its jaws were large enough to swallow a person whole, and its pointed ears were covered with

beautiful white fur that gleamed in the moonlight. It was a gigantic white wolf.

Fenrir / Mythical Lupus (White Wolf)
HP: 40500/40500 / MP: 12600/12600 / STR: 10130
VIT: 9400 / DEX: 5200 / AGI: 9100 / INT: 4210
Divine Blessing(s): [Monarch Caliber]
Titles: Ashen Wolf King

Okay, okay—jinx successful. Can we talk about this, though? It's perfectly normal for Fenrir to exist in a fantasy setting, but why is it a mythical beast and not a monster? Isn't that the kind of being that should only appear once I'm a little stronger—like when I'm halfway through my journey, and not right at the start?

Anyway, what happened was that Fenrir charged me, bit into my right arm, and ran off with me in tow. And while he was charging through the trees, I slammed into a tree trunk. And *now*, due to gravity, I was falling through the air.

Detect notified me of something large closing in on me. I could have figured that out even without it, though, because the bloodlust from behind me was so palpable, and the pressure it exerted so intense. I could envision myself dying, but I couldn't really see the thing that was about to kill me because Omniscience wasn't working well. At any rate, it was rapidly becoming clear that I wasn't going to be able to dodge in time and that, if this kept up, I was dead for sure.

Because I was falling from a height of a couple meters, not to mention the fact that I still couldn't feel any of my limbs, I had no way of maneuvering, and absolutely no chance of avoiding any attacks. But if I didn't dodge, I'd die.

I need to fly! The instant that thought passed through my mind, I grew wings from my back for the first time ever. I didn't even bother to check out their appearance. I just focused all of my attention on flapping them, and in the next moment, I heard the wind whipping past me loudly and the crack of wood splitting apart.

My flight was by no means stable, but still, I flew while flipping a few times in midair, before finally crashing to the ground headfirst.

"Ow..."

I felt pain, which most likely meant I hadn't broken my neck, at least. *Good thing I have high stats.* Rolling over, I positioned myself on all fours. I looked back at the huge tree where Fenrir was, only to see that the wolf had bitten clean through its trunk. It had tried to eat both me and the trunk whole. *Man, this guy's pretty wild.*

Then I noticed a dripping sound, which alerted me to the fact that I was bleeding from my right arm...no, wait, from my right shoulder. *It ate my entire arm?* The seam where my missing arm should have joined to my shoulder was frayed and torn, and all the blood that was supposed to be flowing through my arm was now spraying out like spring water from the

gaps in my muscle fibers. The blood was still hot as it dripped onto my shirt, dyeing it red.

There was also something white protruding from my shoulder—most likely my humerus. Part of it had snapped off, and what remained was only about a third of its original length. Unlike the flesh that had been torn off, however, it was still attached to my shoulder.

As soon as I became aware of the state my body was in, agony lanced through me. My muscles tensed up, and I was on the verge of letting out a guttural scream, but…actually, I really had nothing to worry about. The sensation of pain was not useful information to me, so I discarded it from my mind. The only things that were important right now were being aware of the fact that I'd lost my arm and seeing if I could still keep my balance.

"Now then." I stood up and looked at the white wolf.

It must have spotted me then, because it spit out the tree it'd been chewing and pierced me with a look.

"Humaaan… Whaaat business…have you heeere…?"

Fenrir's rough, low voice rang out inside my head. Oh, so it can talk. Not too surprising since it's a mythical creature. Maybe it can even take a human form.

"My business? Uh… Well, I guess I'm lost."

"Looost, you say?!" He scoffed at my answer.

Yeah, I know you think I'm bullshitting you, but I'm not. Also, what's with the elongated words? Speak clearly!

"You killlled… My brethreeen… Because you were looost?!"

"Ah, no—that was because it attacked me."

Hey, it was self-defense. What was I supposed to do? Just let it kill me? But then again, maybe I shouldn't have come here in the first place. Then I wouldn't have gotten lost and had to kill your brethren in self-defense.

"No matter the caaase… Now that you know of this plaaace… You must periiish…"

If you're going to kill me anyway, then what was the point of asking me why I'm here?!

"What, is this place important or something?" I decided to ask, knowing that he wouldn't answer me.

"I shall tell you, since you are not long for this wooorld…"

Wait, you're gonna tell me?!

"Heeere… We are in land formed by the witch's covenaaant."

"The witch's covenant?"

By "witch," does he mean the one from the original hero's party?

"In exchange for providing us with safe laaands… The witch tasked us with keeping her forest free of monstersss…"

"I see."

So the reason there weren't any traces of monsters in the forest I usually hunted in, save for the occasional goblin or two, was because of the wolves?

Also, this entire space was created by that witch, was it? Had she created the barrier as well as the illusion?

"We are also tasked with the elimination of... Intrudersss..."

So not only did this space reduce the danger of monsters for those within the kingdom, but it also functioned as one of the kingdom's lines of defense. *Clever.*

"We will eliminaaate... All intrudersss... All who know of this plaaace... According to the covenaaant!"

Killing someone for finding out about this is kind of extreme, ain't it? I kinda understood why he had to, though. Even if his actions protected the kingdom, there was no guarantee that the general populace would understand and accept that. If the only reason he was gonna kill me was because I'd learned about this place, though, it probably would've been best if I'd never set foot here at all.

"So you're gonna kill me?"

"Indeeeed... Even if you mean me no haaarm... I cannot allow you to leave here aliiive..." Fenrir's glare was fierce—devoid of any hesitation and filled with pure killing intent. "Your right arm is gooone... No magic toolsss... You've no way of doing battle with meee..."

He's right. The situation is grim. I was a little surprised that he had brought up magic tools, though. As items that allowed humans to fight on even footing with monsters, I guess they were an even bigger deal than I thought. I needed the knight captain to hurry up and teach me how to use them already.

"Surrendeeer... Hold still, and I will grant you a painless deaaath..."

"Sorry, but I don't wanna die."

"You fooool... I will take your left arm neeext—"

Suddenly, as Fenrir's eyes landed on me, his expression changed to one of sheer surprise. *How rude. There's nothing surprising about me.*

"Yooou... Your aaarm..."

Huh? Wait, my right arm is back?! "How...?"

"Youuu're...not humannn?"

I'm not! Totally forgot. I'm a vampire. So did that mean that A) I had abnormally heightened regeneration, or B) I had a secret trove of extra arms that I could pull from? What's that? "A, final answer?" Okay, enough fooling around. This ain't a game show.

As long as I wasn't attacked with something made out of mithril, I could regenerate. *Wait, am I pretty much invincible? What's my health at, anyway?* I checked and saw that it had gone down. Even though my body had regenerated, my HP was about eighty points lower—which was around three percent of my total health. Still, regardless of how much I'd actually lost, would it be more prudent to think of myself as being at low HP?

To put things into perspective, if a normal human had taken this much damage, they'd just barely be clinging to life, so maybe I actually *was* still

healthy. I was curious what, exactly, I could regenerate, and from what state, but...

"If you are not humannn... You are a threaaat! You will not even have time to beg for your liiife!"

...this was clearly not the time for limit testing.

Tensing his hind legs, Fenrir shot towards me like a rocket, his jaws open.

"Hmph." I kicked the ground with all speed and avoided Fenrir's attack as he gouged the place where I'd just been standing.

He may have had three times as much AGI as I did, but my Eye of True Sight gave me the reflexes to avoid him, since I could tell exactly how he'd attack. *I'm cutting it really close, though!*

As soon as I landed on my feet, I began running, but not into the forest. Considering the fact that my Omniscience was useless there, it was the worst available option. After all, it was impossible for me to avoid attacks that I didn't know were coming. That being said, running into the open space was also not a great idea. It was a little like saying, "C'mon, attack me all you want!"

Still, the forest provided at least some cover for me—things that would pose as obstacles to Fenrir. If I had to choose between the open space, where he could freely move around, and the forest, where he'd be slowed down a bit, the answer was obvious—I needed to toe the line between the two areas.

The open space was made of stone tiles, laid out in a circle surrounding the holy-looking great tree in the middle. On the edge of that circle lay the forest. As much as I wished I could keep running around the circle, there were springs, cliffs, and a few sparser sections of trees. Sooner or later, I'd run out of forest to run around.

Because I didn't have the luxury of turning around to look, I used Omniscience to track Fenrir. *Wait, why'd he stop moving?* The only reason I could think of was that he'd gotten hurt, but he hadn't tripped or anything. Instead, he faced me, and though he was poised to pounce, he still showed no sign of moving.

Suddenly, his white fur began to sway—but not because of the wind. It was as if the fur had a mind of its own. In the next moment, though, it froze as if it had been petrified. That was when Fenrir let out a howl so piercing that it could have shattered stone.

His fur shot off of him like little missiles, piercing the trees, the ground, the rocks around us—and my body as well.

"Agh!" Although the majority of the projectiles had landed in my surroundings, I'd been hit by four of them.

Damn, what gives? How come he gets a long-range attack? I yanked out the fur that had embedded itself in my body. I had no clue if the holes it had left in my flesh would heal, so I had no choice but to ignore them for now.

However, I decided to save some of his fur in Shadow Storage to examine later.

Fenrir crouched, then leapt at me once more. The stones beneath his paws cracked as he took off. The very air and trees seemed to tremble from the force of the shock wave, and the sound of it tore through the very trees. His great white body rapidly closed in on me until he was pretty much the only thing I could see. *How's it fair for something this big to be so damn fast?!*

I kicked off of the tree right in front of me and changed my direction, just narrowly avoiding Fenrir as he crashed into it. It used to be a fairly large tree, but now it lay in bits and pieces. He had come at it with enough force to rip it out by its roots and completely obliterate it. Truly the stuff of legends.

Fortunately, the distance he was jumping was further than before, and he was also slower than before, so I was able to dodge him without too much difficulty. Altogether, I'd only taken twenty damage from his ranged attack, which was a lot less than I'd expected. Sure, his jaws packed more of a punch, but I think this particular attack had hit an organ or something. I could tell because of the taste of blood in my mouth. That being said, internal damage was much worse than losing an arm, so how had I lost less HP than when I'd had my arm ripped off? *I'll have to think about this some other time.*

While I was lost in thought, the wounds I'd received from the fur projectiles healed. I wasn't exactly sure how my regeneration worked, but it looked like my blood had swirled around my wounds before they closed. This was something else I needed to investigate, when I had the time.

Fenrir began to weave through the trees, chasing after me. *Seriously?!* I'd rather have kept dealing with his ranged attacks. He had a lot more AGI than I did, so it was easy for him to reach me before I could escape. I'd been making good enough use of the trees to dodge him, but one misstep would spell disaster.

I avoided his bites and body slams, but his jaws were always within two meters of me. If I even turned to try to look at him, I'd immediately be bitten in two. Omniscience allowed me to dodge him narrowly, but if I couldn't even turn around, I had no way of attacking. It was only a matter of time until he got me.

"Raaargh!"

"Agh!"

Just as I reached the edge of the forest right by one of the cliffs and springs, I took an attack to the gut. Even though it was more of a scratch, it gouged my flesh, and the shock of the impact resounded through my body. It was very likely that I'd broken a few ribs and probably other bones too. If this kept up, I was dead meat.

At once, I reached into my Shadow Storage and pulled something out—three trees that I'd used Conqueror on. Their leaves, roots, branches—every

part of them was covered in pitch black. I'd had no clue what purpose they'd serve when I'd initially put them into storage, but right now, I intended to use them to stop Fenrir in his tracks. He was too big to use a net on, but the trees I'd brought out were about the same size as him, so they could at least buy me some time.

I threw the three trees at him with Puppet Master, and because they'd appeared basically out of thin air, he was unable to dodge them. They hit him square on, and although they might have done no damage to him—if anything, the trees were the ones who took damage from that—all I needed was an opening.

"Hngh?!"

Yes! Just as I'd planned! While Fenrir was thrown off guard by the trees, I created as much distance between us as I could. As soon as the trees shattered, my hold over them disappeared. This confirmed that the power I wielded over objects under the influence of Conqueror was relinquished when they were subjected to physical impacts hard enough to break them. However, at this point, I no longer had the trees as a trick up my sleeve, and I still wasn't in the best position.

The scratch from before had torn apart the pocket protector on my shirt, which contained the drawings of both the magic circles I could use. At the moment, I only had one magic circle stored in my Eye of Sigils, that being my hypnosis spell. Basically, if I wanted to switch to the summoning magic, I'd have to pull it out and look at it. Since I had no way of doing that right now, I had no way to quickly escape. I was in a *really* bad situation.

I couldn't just keep running either. Now, all I could do was try to figure out how to survive his attacks.

I broke into a run, pulling my throwing knives out from Shadow Storage. I threw them with all my might towards the center of the area, then immediately used Puppet Master to stop them, making them hover in the air. Then, with Puppet Master, I made each of them point towards Fenrir. Since Conqueror allowed items to retain their state, that means they kept their original inertia even while they were hovering in midair. If I released them from Puppet Master, they'd fly in the direction they were now pointing with the same force as when I had initially thrown them.

As I ran, I continued throwing out knives and making them hover. At my current level, I could control about forty knives, which was a great improvement from when I was first summoned and could only control about twenty-five simultaneously. If my guess was right, the number of knives I could control correlated with my INT. It didn't mean I had to be smart, but rather that I had to be capable of holding multiple thoughts simultaneously.

I continued to dodge the big bad wolf, and by the time I'd done a full lap around the area, I had thrown out forty knives, positioned all through the air. At that point, Fenrir stopped and readied himself to shoot his fur at me again. He may have thought he had the upper hand, but I'd been waiting for this moment—for him to stop moving.

Just as he began firing at me, I released all forty knives right at him. Some of the knives went straight towards him, others zigzagged, still others weaved up and down like a roller coaster or from side to side. They approached him from all different angles, and because of their varied approaches, it was impossible to predict the trajectories of all of them.

There was absolutely no way for Fenrir, who'd stopped to fire his projectiles, to dodge, which meant every last knife hit its target, but... *Ugh! Why's his skin so goddamn tough?!* It was like he hadn't taken any damage at all. Every knife seemed to bounce right off him, even those that had been aimed at what I thought were his weak points. Not a single one of them pierced him, or even sliced a single hair on his body.

Maybe it was to be expected, though. The Black Wood Knives were hard, but they weren't sharp. I hadn't expected them to be any good as weapons...but actually, there was a certain something contained within each of them.

```
Shadow Silver Dagger (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 70000 Dells
A Shadow Silver Knife. As strong and sharp as steel. Its black
luster is beautiful; however, since it's lost its silvery
appearance, it has little value as a decorative item.
```

This was the result of my playing around with the candlestick holder that I'd turned into a knife, trying to infuse it with shadow magic. Yet even these couldn't cut through his fur, let alone his skin.

"It's futiiile!"

It looked as though he'd barely even noticed the knives, simply proceeding with his ranged attack. He must not have had great control over the projectiles because the majority of them missed me, but it was the number of them that was the problem. Even if I could see their trajectories, it was impossible for me to evade all of them. Sure, my AGI may not have been high enough, but even if it had been, the sheer volume of them made it hard to dodge them no matter how fast I was. It was a rather effective AOE attack.

I pulled out my Black Wood Sword and began deflecting the attacks as I ran. I felt no resistance or weight as I hit them, and ultimately, I could only slightly alter their flight path. But that was good enough for me.

The scratch I'd received to my chest still hurt, but the wound had healed and my HP still hadn't dropped too much. Basically, I didn't have to try to dodge all of them. All I had to do was make sure that I wasn't hit in any vitals or in my legs. As long as I wasn't fatally injured, I could keep running.

I took a hit and winced. So far, I'd taken damage to my stomach, shoulder, and neck. Getting hit in the neck really hurt. It hadn't hit my airway, so I could still breathe fine, but it didn't change the fact that it hurt.

If I took a hit in the spinal cord, though, I'd probably lose all control over my body. *I'm gonna have to be more careful.*

I put the sword back in Shadow Storage and used Puppet Master to retrieve the knives I'd thrown. If I couldn't damage him with the knives, I'd have to change tactics.

"Youuu... Why are you still aliiive?!"

"I'm sturdier than I look... Probably."

I tried to change the shape of the sword with Armament Craft. With the way I'd attacked before, my attack had lost all power after making contact with his body. I couldn't rely on these weapons that really only had one way of being used. Plus, they were only strong in the direction that they had initially been thrown, meaning that my angle of attack was limited. With that in mind, I needed a different kind of weapon.

```
Black Wood Shuriken (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 34000 Dells
A shuriken made out of black wood. Shaped like a gear, it has
more edges than a normal shuriken. If spun while being thrown,
it can sever objects like an electric saw. It contains traces of
shadow silver, adding to its sharpness as well as its balance
while in flight.
```

Using the knives as a base, I used Armament Craft to create these shurikens. Since I used materials already in my possession, they didn't take too much MP to craft. I wanted to make forty, but it seemed like I didn't have enough shadow silver, which left me with twenty instead.

"Are those...magic toolsss?"

"Huh?"

"The way they soar through the aiiir... Their strange shaaape... They could only be magic toolsss!"

"Uh, yeah. I guess so? I'm not really sure." Did magic tools have the same kinds of effects as my items? Now I *really* wanted them! "Anyway, go get 'em," I said as I threw the shurikens at him.

As they flew towards Fenrir, they shaved off parts of trees, but still continued to spin at high speeds. They were flies honing in on fresh meat. *Hmm. I probably could've come up with a better metaphor than that.*

"Still you persiiist... Your weak attacksss... Are all futiiile!"

Yeah, I know. Even if I could cut through some of his fur, I probably couldn't cut into his flesh. However, the fact that the shurikens were able to cut through trees did prove that they were fairly sharp. Plus, their power was more dependent on their spinning rather than the kinetic energy they'd received from my throw.

As soon as they made contact with his body, their rotation would slow down, and when it stopped, I'd retrieve them and throw them once more.

Paying absolutely no attention to the shurikens, Fenrir continued charging at me. Meanwhile, I continued to use Puppet Master to attack him with the shurikens, while dodging his swipes. Surprisingly, the trees I'd used before had done a good job at slowing him down. After that, he'd stopped trying to attack me at close range.

Also, there seemed to be a limit to his ranged attacks. There wasn't as much hair on him compared to when he'd first started using the attack. That being said, there was still about three-fourths of it left. Waiting for him to run out wasn't an option.

"Why do you only ruuun?!" Fenrir yelled at me as he turned.

What other choice do I have when none of my attacks work? Or at least, I had no other choice until now. *It's done.* Fenrir went into a crouch, poised to strike again.

I looked at the huge tree in the middle of the area, into which I'd carved the summoning circle, and stored the circle in my eye.

Fenrir's fur began to sway, indicating that he was about to launch his ranged attack. Then, in the next moment, he went still.

That's when I teleported above him. It all happened so fast that Fenrir could do nothing but let out a gasp of surprise. *Ah, what a nice expression.*

"Dropkick!"

I unleashed my strongest attack right onto Fenrir's head, slightly concussing him, and making a perfect opening for myself. With a Black Wood Knife in each hand, I drove the blades into both of his eyes, completely destroying them—piercing lens, iris, ciliary body, vitreous body, retina, and cornea. I then twisted the knives in place, expelling tears, some kind of bodily fluid, and various liquids mixed with blood.

"Gaaah!!!"

Finally, I was treated to Fenrir's anguished scream. Running away really wasn't my style. Even if I couldn't win, I had to at least do some kind of damage.

"Graaah!!!" Fenrir continued to bellow, a sound of anger mixed with pain from losing both his eyes.

While he was distracted, I jumped to the edge of the forest. The shurikens I'd thrown at Fenrir had merely been a feint. My real target was the huge tree in the center of the area. I'd used the shurikens that Fenrir had repelled to carve a magic circle into the tree without him noticing.

At this point, Fenrir continued to launch his ranged attack, but since his vision had yet to recover, he wasn't accurate at all. He was just firing madly in all directions, but none of the projectiles had any chance of hitting me, since I'd already moved far away.

I licked the blood off my knife. *This acidity... Hm, Type A, Rh negative?* It had a pretty smooth, rich consistency, and the way it went down was just different. Type A blood is...how do I explain this? You know what—nah. Forget it. There's no point trying to explain something that won't be understood anyway.

Also, I didn't want to jinx myself with a monologue and set myself up for death. Anyway, I might not be able to explain exactly how a blood type tastes, but to put it simply, it tasted good. *Really* good. So much better than a Kecho. Maybe that meant that the stronger the monster, the better tasting the blood.

Putting aside my gourmet opinions, though, I turned my attention back to Fenrir. He'd been howling in agony before, but it seemed like he'd calmed down and was looking this way. He might not have had eyes, but since he was a wolf, he could probably gauge my position with his nose.

On the surface, he may have seemed calm…but I could tell that he was ready to kill, even more so than before. It was so strong that even from way over here, fear ran through me. There was nothing scarier than a cornered animal.

Even though I'd taken out his eyes, I hadn't turned the tables. I might have actually made things worse. If anything, I'd lost my one chance to catch him off guard. Up until this moment, he'd only seen me as a target to eliminate. Now, though, he probably wanted to tear me to shreds. He saw me as his enemy.

The cool night air swept over my body, which was still ready to fight. The leaves danced in the wind and grazed against my cheeks, with a strange, tickling sensation that was neither pain nor an itch. Maybe it was thanks to my Night Vision, but it was as if my senses were heightened. I could sense every leaf that had fallen to the ground, every detail of the bark on the trees, the warmth from the stars—all of it was burned into my retinas.

I could sense, vividly, the expanding and contracting of my muscles, the sound of red blood cells as they flowed through my veins, and the beating of my heart as my body swayed in time with it. I must have been smiling slightly.

The two of us were enemies—different, yet somehow similar. But I had no chance of winning like this. There was nowhere else I could attack, aside from his eyes, which left me with one option—to run. I looked up to the sky and teleported up there. Then, while using Anti-Illusion, I used Omniscience and Far-sight to confirm the location of the castle.

Even though I was fairly high up in the air, Fenrir leapt right at me. But before he could close his jaws around me, I teleported back to the castle.

On this fine afternoon, there were four people taking lunch in the palace dining hall. All four of them had been summoned by the Rising Sun Kingdom…but only Ryuto, Aoi, and Tamaki had been summoned as heroes. The last individual, Inori, had been a freebie.

It'd been a little over two weeks since they'd arrived, and Ryuto appeared to have mostly mastered the table manners expected of nobles. With his grace and that aura of refinement around him, he'd fit into any high-class setting.

“I really think the relationship between the first princess and the second princess isn’t great,” Ryuto said.

“You sure about that? Isn’t the second princess just kinda hard to get along with?” Tamaki responded in bland tones, trying to mask her great interest in the subject.

“Well, sure, but…”

“Her expression never changes—you never know what she’s thinking. It’s creepy…”

“That’s like Aoi, though, isn’t it?” Ryuto asked.

“Hm?” Aoi, who up until that moment had been quietly focused on her food, looked up. It was likely that she, herself, knew that she was not very expressive.

“But with Aoi, if you hang out with her long enough, you can kinda tell how she’s feeling from the look on her face,” Tamaki asserted.

“Hm. Okay…” said Ryuto. “Then how’s she feeling right now?”

Tamaki stared at Aoi. Under her gaze, Aoi stopped eating—briefly—but soon enough returned to her meal.

“...Hungry. She’s not thinking about anything except the food in front of her.”

“Oh, what a coincidence. I just came to the same conclusion.”

Tamaki let out a sigh. “Where do all the calories you eat go?” she asked, as Aoi continued stuffing her face. “To your breasts, right?!”

“Hm?!” Aoi jumped as Tamaki embraced her from behind.

“I’m gonna pull them right off!”

“Wai— Stop!” Aoi pleaded.

“Uh... Ahem.” No longer able to handle the scene playing out before him, Ryuto cleared his throat, blushing. At this interruption, Tamaki finally let go of Aoi and returned to her seat in embarrassment. “Anyway... It doesn’t seem like the first princess actually hates the second princess.”

“How would you know?” Tamaki asked doubtfully.

Ryuto grimaced. “Well, unfortunately, I’m not as dense as your typical rom-com protagonist.”

“Huh?”

“Instead, I happen to have these two Skills—Harem and Affection Chance.”

“Meaning...?”

“With them, I’m able to charm the princess…”

Y’know, it’s kinda frightening when people are aware that they have the makings of a main character.

“Huh? Are you a lolicon?!”

“Nah, it’s not like she’s fallen in love with me or something. Anyway, she decided to confide in me about her relationship with the second princess.”

Ryuto had no desire to romance the princess. Though his only objective was to get friendly with her, his protagonist nature made it impossible to keep things platonic.

“Wow. You’re kinda like the scum of the earth.”

“I know…” Uncomfortable, Ryuto stared at his feet.

Tamaki exhaled. “So? What did you get out of her, womanizer?”

“She said that because of their positions and the opinions of the people around her, it’s been hard to interact with the second princess. Things have become especially strained ever since she became the first princess. My guess would be that, given the way her personality is, she’s having trouble trying to reconcile with the second princess.”

“Jeez, she sure opened her heart up to you, huh?”

Ryuto finished eating, and placed his silverware on the table before letting out a short sigh. “Apparently, she wants to call the second princess ‘big sister.’”

“Yeah… I can see why that’d be kinda complicated.”

“So I’ve been trying to come up with ideas to help them make up. Maybe we can even help end this pointless struggle between them for the throne.”

“You want us—people who have nothing to do with their internal politics—to help? You’re way too nice.”

“So is that a no?”

“Huh? Whatever. Do what you want. If you *really* want me to help, then I guess I could—”

“Thanks, Tamaki!” Ryuto said, smiling brightly.

“S-Sure…” Tamaki’s cheeks were now tinged pink.

It would appear that Ryuto’s main character skill was hard at work. When Tamaki eventually regained her composure, she cleared her throat and asked Ryuto a question.

“So, if you mean to do something about the first princess, what should we do about the second princess? We’ve barely even talked to her.”

“Oh, well, I was hoping that we could get Inori’s help, since the second princess is teaching him. Do we have your support, Inori?”

“Zzz…”

Inori was currently facedown on the table, fast asleep. He’d cleared a space on the table so that he could get comfortable.

“I-Inori! Wake up! Did you hear anything I said?!”

“Wuh? Uh…” Inori rubbed his eyes as Ryuto shook him awake. He looked at Ryuto, his eyelids drooping. “Dunno what’s going on but…you got this…” He gave Ryuto a thumbs-up before slumping back over the table and passing out.

“It’s not your encouragement I need! Inori, wake *up*!”

Unfortunately, Inori had already fallen back into a deep sleep and was no longer in a position where he could participate in their conversation.

God, I’m so tired. Thanks to my fatigue, I’d spent our entire lunch break unconscious. However, the rest I got during lunch wasn’t enough to stop me from sleeping through my lecture too. Even with all that sleep, I was still

ready to pass out at any minute. But anyway, here I was, using Stealth to sneak into the Fifth Armory.

After yesterday's battle, I had decided I wanted to get my hands on some iron, which is why I was in the armory. Detect told me there was nobody around, but even so, I made sure to open the door quietly. As I did, I was greeted by a gust of dusty air carrying the metallic scent of iron.

Unlike the other armories, the Fifth Armory only had practice weapons, and thus it wasn't very heavily guarded. Inside were implements like wooden swords, arrows without tips, and edgeless broadswords. My goal was the training swords. Even though the chances that I'd actually get caught were very low, I made sure to pilfer only a little bit of iron from each of the hundreds of swords in the armory.

I used the iron to craft shadow-fortified needles and then stored them in my shadow. Every little bit would come in handy. After ten minutes of this, I had about ten kilograms of iron.

"This should be good enough for now, I guess… Oh?"

I'd completely overlooked the shelves that held weapons for mages. Though most of the practice staffs there were wooden, a silvery staff made entirely from metal caught my eye. Staffs were usually made from wood or monster parts, as these materials had high magic conductivity. Magic dissipated very easily with most metals, so it didn't have too much use as a material for crafting magic tools.

However, after using Appraisal, I found that the staff was actually made of mithril. It may not have been pure mithril, but it was still probably the first time I'd encountered a metal from a fantasy setting. Thanks to all the books I'd read, I knew that pure mithril did not exist, and that mithril blended well with other metals.

Using mithril in an alloy helped to preserve the original metal's magical properties, while the entire alloy had a uniform melting point. Because of this, it wasn't possible to separate mithril out of a mithril alloy, which is why there was no way to make pure mithril. It was normal for most weapons to be about fifty percent mithril or more, but no matter how good the quality of the mithril was, you couldn't go over eighty percent mithril. It was all quite interesting. I wondered if that was the best you could do even if you used electrolysis. Could the science of Earth distill it? I didn't really know too much about metals. I couldn't use Armament Craft to extract the mithril by itself either. Apparently, metal extraction wasn't included in the Skill's kit. Would've been such an easy way to make money, though…

The magic conductivity of mithril depended heavily on its purity. Apparently, this staff was about thirty percent mithril. That was probably more than enough for a practice staff. I doubt anyone'll notice a practice staff getting a tiny bit lighter, and I'm not gonna let this chance to get my hands on a rare metal pass me by. I'll just take a little bit off the top. After all, it's not a crime if I don't get caught.

Stealthily, I made my way back through the castle, and finally reached my room. By now, the sun had set, and it was time for me to reflect on yesterday's battle with Fenrir so that I could be prepared for the next time I took him on. I planned on having a rematch with him tomorrow. He was still wounded, which made it a great opportunity for me.

As long as I was properly prepared, there was a decent chance I could win. Besides, now that he considered me an enemy, it would've been a waste not to fight him again. I finally had an enemy in this world, and I would kill that enemy with my own two hands.

So, without further ado, it was time to begin strategizing. First, I needed to do something about my biggest problem—my lack of firepower, or rather, weapons. All I had in my arsenal were shadow-fortified wooden swords, wooden knives, and silver knives. Not exactly the best equipment I could have.

Now that I'd collected some iron, though, maybe I could finally craft a real weapon. The only thing was, I had no clue whether it'd be enough for me to deal a fatal blow to Fenrir.

Second, I'd learned that I had a mysterious regenerative ability which allowed me to heal fractures and cuts, regrow missing appendages, and so on. Apparently, while I was regenerating, I took a hit to my HP, but I had no idea how that calculation worked. My HP had barely decreased when my organs were crushed, but taking attacks that didn't seem that serious cut my HP way more than I'd expected.

My current hypothesis was that the amount of HP I lost was proportional to the amount or weight of flesh I lost. For example, I'd taken about 80 damage from losing an arm. Then, whenever I was hit by one of Fenrir's long-range attacks, I'd lost about 5 HP or so. Even if I was hit in the neck or gut or arm, I only took 5 damage. Even if I took a hit or a cut, fractured a bone, or had internal bleeding, my HP didn't go down, which was most likely because I hadn't actually lost any flesh.

If I lost half my body, then I'd take damage equal to losing half my flesh, so probably about 400 damage. That meant I'd take around 800 damage if I lost my entire body. But even then, I'd have about 600 HP left, so I'd still be in pretty good shape. I'd started out with around 800 HP when I first arrived here, after all.

But I still couldn't let my guard down. A vampire's fatal weakness was probably his heart. The process of regeneration seemed to involve blood becoming flesh. Maybe the regenerative ability actually lived in a vampire's blood, or something. Seeing as it was that organ that pumped the blood around a vampire's body, it would make sense for that to be a vampire's weak point.

Third, I was a little bothered by the fact that my flesh hadn't healed that one time I cut my finger with the silver candlestick that I'd turned into a knife. This had nothing to do with my battle with Fenrir, but it was still on my mind. I decided to test it again, and changed the candlestick holder-

shaped knife into a plain dagger once more. Afterwards, I paused to admire how beautiful it was. I could even see my reflection in it. It really would've made a nice decorative item.

I put the blade to my wrist and pressed down, cutting deeper than before because my increased VIT made it harder to break the skin. I put a little more force into it and finally made a cut about five centimeters wide. Blood began to flow from the wound, and it showed no sign of stopping even after ten seconds. *What's going on?*

As a further test, I decided to try making a light, iron knife and cut myself in the same way as I had with the silver knife. Blood poured out of the wound briefly, but in the next moment, it healed up, and there wasn't even a scar.

Traditionally, vampires were weak to silver, but in this world, they were weak to mithril. So I decided to try mithril this time. Due to not having enough material, I could only really make a small knife, but its silver color was still beautiful.

It looked exactly the same as the knife I'd just made, but seemed more divine somehow, which I suppose was to be expected of a holy metal. I placed the knife against my skin in the same location as before, but then hesitated. *As long as it's just a small cut, I shouldn't die...right? Huh. I'm kinda scared.* After a few moments, I finally found the courage to do it.

Surprisingly, unlike when I'd cut myself with the silver knife, the wound healed. My HP didn't change at all either. Nothing changed. Mithril was supposed to be the weakness of vampires in this world, but it sure felt like silver was more effective. Maybe it was a difference between the vampires of the world I'd originally been summoned to when I received the gift of vampirism, and the vampires of this world. If that was the case, then any information I'd obtained about the vampires here was useless because we'd probably have different weaknesses. I might as well have been an entirely new breed of vampire.

The goddess had mentioned that she'd tweak my Skills and gifts to suit this world...but maybe, instead of adjusting them to adhere to the laws of this world, she'd simply made it so that I'd be able to make use of them here.

In the first place, this world didn't have Skills or the concept of leveling up, but I was still able to level up, use Skills, and even steal them. My Eye of Sigils couldn't use any of the magic from this world, and the people of this world couldn't properly measure my mana. I wasn't able to wield any of the spells from this world either. In essence, my Skills ignored the laws that governed this world. Or perhaps it was my existence here that was irregular...

Anyway, it was time to return my attention to the matter of battling Fenrir. I had a pretty good idea of how much damage I could take from him before it became lethal. The only thing I needed to figure out now was how

to kill him. I pulled out some of the fur from Fenrir's long-range attacks. It wasn't crystallized like it had been when it was launched at me—now, it was just normal soft fur. I had tried playing around with it after the battle, and discovered that its composition was most fascinating.

The fur reacted to magic, and was able to crystallize, harden, and shrink. I couldn't use spells from this world, but because I had dark magic, I at least kind of understood how magic worked, so I knew what it felt like to infuse something with mana.

My thinking was to use the fur as a weapon somehow. I'd collected a good amount of it during our battle, and it seemed that I could use Conqueror on it as well. While using Armament Craft, I infused the fur with dark magic.

Gleipnir (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 5000000 Dells / Abilities: Shadow Hardening, Crystallization, Fortification, Shrink
Strings infused with dark magic, made from the fur of a white wolf. It is very sturdy and cannot be torn. It is also strongly resistant to slashing attacks. Crystallization ability is halved.

Hang on—I totally just crafted something god-tier. The name made it sound like it should've been a rope or perhaps chains, but this was just string that looked like it could be used for sewing. I also hadn't expected the fur to retain its abilities. Maybe this was a result of all the experimenting I'd done up until now, or maybe it was thanks to Shina's knowledge. Also, what's up with that crazy value?!

Next, I tried infusing the iron knife with dark magic.

Dark Iron Dagger (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 80000 Dells / Abilities: Shadow Hardening
A knife made of dark iron. It is as hard and as sharp as adamantite. Its black luster is beautiful, and it is a very effective weapon.

The iron had turned into dark iron. It would seem that I'd finally gotten my hands on a real weapon. Judging by the item description, this world had adamantite. I really wanted to try making a weapon with it. And what would it be like if I infused adamantite with dark magic? It made me want to try to infuse other things with dark magic. I really wanted to see what would happen. *Hey, maybe I could make gauntlets or something?*

Abyssal Gauntlets
Quality: A / Value: 1000000 Dells / Abilities: Shadow Hardening, Fortification, Shrink, Crystallization

Jet-black gauntlets woven with both black threads and Gleipnir threads. Will harden when infused with magic. They are very sturdy and will not break or be cut. However, they lack the ability to absorb blows. There are white magic circles carved into the backs of the gauntlets.

Holy shit! What is this?! I just made *the* item for edgelords. Why is it "Abyssal" now? Also, the magic circles that were carved into the gauntlets were the summoning circle on the left gauntlet and the subjugation spell circle on the right. This meant that I could easily switch between them whenever I wanted.

Moving on, though, I wanted to experiment on something else. My lunch, which had garlic in it, had been stealthily stored in my shadow; I pulled it out now. I cast Conqueror over it, which coated it entirely in black and made it look really gross, but the smell was gone. It was just as I'd expected—Conqueror could suppress the air particles which carried smells away from objects.

Even though I'd taken out Fenrir's eyes, he still had an acute sense of smell. If I wanted to defeat him, I couldn't be careless. But with this discovery, I could take him out! Or, well, at the very least, I had a path to beat him…but I still had to pull it off. If I let my guard down at all, I'd lose for sure.

It was still too early for the residents of the castle to be asleep, but I'd concluded my experiments. What was I to do now? I fished around my shadow and pulled out my bloody dress shirt—one of the few possessions I'd brought over from Earth.

I actually really liked this shirt. I wasn't into fashion or anything; it was just a safe option that I could wear pretty much anywhere and at any time. But after the battle with Fenrir, it was missing a sleeve, and was basically shredded in the front.

Needless to say, that definitely wasn't a style that I could pull off. I was able to fool Nala by saying that I'd lost it, but I really wanted her to fix it for me. It wasn't like I was super attached to it or anything, but throwing it out felt like a waste.

Then again, even if I couldn't sew, maybe I could turn it into armor with Armament Craft. I decided to give it a whirl, and used some of the black threads to replace what was missing.

Black Blood Shirt (Creator: Inori Takafuji)
Quality: A / Value: 1000000 Dells / Abilities: Shadow Hardening, Regeneration
A shirt that's been infused with dark magic. It is light and flexible, but as hard as iron. It has been dyed with vampire blood, giving it self-restorative powers. Rate of regeneration

improves upon absorbing blood. Current regeneration rate: 80%

Wow… I'd only intended to mend it, but I had ended up making something insane. I'd had no clue that Armament Craft could make use of vampire blood. Had this happened because it was on my mind? The fact that the shirt could restore itself was a really nice feature, and it was even more perfect because it used my blood to do so. *Maybe everything I make from now on should have my blood in it.*

Well, after an evening of crafting, I'd ended up creating some great defensive options, so maybe the time was right for my revenge match. I looked out the window and teleported myself to the forest.

◇

Using Photographic Memory, I retraced the path I'd taken yesterday into the illusory forest without any difficulty, equipped with my usual shirt—or I guess it was armor now—and my gauntlets. Before I realized it, the regeneration rate of my shirt had gone up to 100%. I'd only fed it a little bit of blood by cutting myself with my silver knife, and the wound had fully closed up not too long ago. The shirt had such high efficiency. Anyway, wounds from silver really healed up faster than I'd expected. My regeneration could easily outpace such a small amount of blood loss, making it so that I pretty much took no damage. There might not have been a reason for me to be scared of silver at all.

The forest was no different from yesterday. Detect was still useless, so I immediately used Omniscience. From what Fenrir had said to me, I could guess that he had a pretty good idea of everything happening within this forest, so he probably already knew I'd snuck in.

That's when I heard a loud roar. *Ah, there he is.* In the next moment, I saw the large body of the white wolf, Fenrir, crashing through the trees and snapping them as he went, trunks and all. His trajectory was pretty obvious, so it was really easy to dodge. Afterwards, I took a step back to put some distance between us. As for Fenrir, he wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he wanted to kill me.

"Have you learned nothiiing? Yet again, you dare to appear before meee?!"

It seemed like his eyes had yet to recover, but thanks to his nose and ears, it was still easy for him to attack me. Maybe that was partly because he had full awareness of the forest. But sight was critical in battle, so I was in a good position thanks to my Eye of True Sight. With it, I had sharper senses than even Fenrir.

His face was twisted with anger, probably because of the destruction of his eyes. There wasn't a trace of the dignity he had when we'd first met…although to be fair, he'd only had that dignity for the first ten seconds of our meeting, I guess.

"Youuu… You will not leave here aliiive!"

"Aw, you mad. Are you *that* upset I hurt you?"

First, I had to stoke the fires of his hate for me. His stats were leagues above mine, and the strategy I planned to use to counter that fact meant I needed all of his attention on me. But Fenrir just snorted at my provocation. He didn't even seem angry. All he did was poise himself to attack.

"Yes, there's thaaat... But more importantlyyy... I must excise an existence such as yours from this foreeest!" Unleashing a howl, Fenrir leapt at me.

Even though I knew when to dodge and was a good distance away, I still cut it pretty close. Was he faster than before?

"Is this place that important to you, Fenrir?"

"Of couuurse... This foreeest... My brethreeen... They are as important to me as life itseeelf!"

His motives hadn't changed. He wanted to protect this forest and his brethren, and his beliefs had led him here—it was as though protection was his very lifeblood. Hm, he was a lot more interesting than I'd thought.

"You're so interesting...I wanna kill you." As I dodged his next attack, three things flew out from within my shadow.

They tumbled to the ground and then pounced onto Fenrir, tearing into his legs with their teeth.

"What are theeese?!"

They were black wolves. They had demon-like eyes, fiery red, and could not be reasoned with. They were half Fenrir's size, but the attack was still enough to make him howl in surprise. He could tell from their scent that these were his former brethren.

"I made them my thralls. They're not yours anymore." I smirked at him, in an attempt to get his hate juices fully flowing.

I'd stored them in my shadow previously before turning them into my thralls. Aren't black wolves kinda the perfect thralls for a vampire? Or maybe black dogs would've been better... I wasn't really looking to have pets or anything, though. At any rate, how would Fenrir react, knowing that the ones he'd sworn to protect were now his enemies? How did he feel, knowing that they were at my beck and call?

Fenrir's face distorted worse than before. There was nothing but rage in that look.

"Youuu... Youuu... You bastaaard!!!"

He began attacking me over and over, in quick succession. Up until this point, I'd kept my distance in order to safely dodge his attacks, but I couldn't do that anymore. He closed the space between us instantly, making sure that I couldn't get away.

At this point I ordered my wolves to try to stop Fenrir's movements, which only made him angrier.

"Youuu... How low will you siiink?!"

He was too freakin' mad. How many times was he gonna say "you"? Because of how he'd been charging recklessly through the forest, he'd pretty much flattened the area around us. So far, so good.

However, I was reaching the end of my ability to slow him down. As expected, Fenrir bit the wolves to pull them off him, then flung them away. Apparently, he was okay with throwing them but not attacking them.

Afterwards, he began to attack me rapidly again. I was able to dodge the first two attacks, but it was impossible to avoid more. The wind created by his movements blew me off my feet, and then I took a hit from his huge front paw, straight to my chest. My rib cage shattered, piercing the organs that it was supposed to protect. Not only that, but I felt liquid spewing out of my mouth, from both my windpipe and esophagus.

Tumbling through the air, I crashed into a nearby tree. Fenrir turned towards me, and because he could tell I wasn't moving anymore, leapt at me to land the finishing blow with his teeth. But, for me, all those broken bones and the internal damage might as well have been nothing.

Teleport!

Before Fenrir's jaws closed around me, I teleported myself into the air, making this the second time that I'd teleported today. Instead of my body, he bit through the tree his jaws had landed on, crushing it to splinters. *My, what big teeth you have...*

"Youuu..." It seemed like Fenrir had learned from our previous encounter, because he'd already realized I was in the air. "You will not escaaape!!!"

He leapt at me, and I could tell that he was going to reach me if I didn't do anything, so I decided to teleport myself even higher. He must've taken into account how high he'd had to jump yesterday to reach me. As a result, I had to teleport for the third time that day.

Starting from full MP, I could only teleport myself across short distances seven times. I'd used my first to come here from the castle, and then I'd teleported twice in the air just a moment ago. That meant that I had four left...although I had to use two of those to get back home later, by teleporting myself into the air and then back to my room. So really, I only had two teleports left.

In other words, teleporting was an emergency escape mechanism I could use to get myself out of any sticky situation, but there was a limit to how many times it could be used. Sure, I should have reserved it for running away, but being able to see the entire area from up here made it easier for me to control the situation.

I spread the wings I still wasn't used to using, and slowed my fall. I wasn't able to fly freely, but all I needed right now was a little time. With Fenrir tumbling back to the ground after failing to seize me, I was able to pull eight knives from my shadow. I threw them, storing kinetic energy in them, then used Puppet Master to adjust their trajectories.

"These childish tricks won't wooork!"

I sent the knives all around Fenrir, scratching his body. From what I could see, the Dark Iron Dagger was doing a lot more damage than the silver version, which only seemed able to cut through the fur. In contrast,

the Dark Iron Dagger was able to actually pierce his skin, though not very deeply. If I tried to cut too deep, Conqueror would be dispelled and I'd lose control over them, making it hard to recover them later.

"Your efforts are futiiile!"

The fur on Fenrir's body stood on end and quivered, signaling that he was about to launch his long-range attack. He seemed to have more fur than he'd had at the end of the battle yesterday, but not all of it, which meant that he probably needed more than a day to fully recover.

"Take thisss!!!"

My knives were hard, but I still made sure to move them out of the path of his attack, since I'd be screwed if they broke. Crystallized strands of his fur filled my view. Hanging in the air like that, I was pretty much a sitting duck. I pulled out my Black Wood Sword and blocked all attacks that would've hit my heart. I didn't bother dodging anything else, just letting it hit me.

I took two hits in my right arm, one in my left arm, one in my left cheek, one in my shoulder, three in my stomach, and three in one of my wings, making a total of eleven holes in my body. Blood poured out of me, spilling into the air.

"Whaaat?!"

But despite this, I was able to keep my height in the air. It was great that I'd only taken 45 damage, but more importantly, I'd bought more time. By the time I'd stopped my body from spinning through the air, all the holes his fur had made in me had healed. I saw Fenrir brace himself, growing cautious after realizing his long-range attack had failed.

All right—time for a battle of attrition.

◇

Night had finally fallen, and everything in the castle was quiet. Aegiana carefully descended a certain spiral staircase, with only the small glow of a magic lamp to light her way through the darkness. Each step she took echoed across the walls. Finally, at the bottom, she was met with a door, which she promptly knocked on four times.

"Who is it?" a muffled voice called out from the other side.

But Aegiana ignored this and knocked an additional three times.

"Where does your heart lie?" This time, the person had a different question.

"With my country."

"The sun?"

"Has set."

"Your desire?"

"For another dawn."

"Your name?"

"Aegiana Itze."

There was silence.

Then, the sound of a lock and a doorknob turning. The wooden door opened towards Aegiana.

“We’ve been waiting, Knight Captain.”

“Well met,” Aegiana replied tersely to the young warrior who’d opened the door.

“The chancellor awaits you.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

Aegiana proceeded to a room in the back. Sitting there in a plain chair, waiting for her, was the chancellor. She bowed slightly, at which the chancellor cracked a light smile, though he never lost his air of seriousness.

“I’ve been waiting, Knight Captain Itze.”

“I don’t believe these precautions are necessary for us to meet. After all, I am to be your wife.” Aegiana said these words calmly.

“Well, yes… To the public, you will be.” He grimaced. “I need you to bear my child, but I will not ask for your love.”

“Am I lacking in some way, Sir Bitrei?”

“Of course not! Any man would be lucky to have a beautiful woman like you! You’re wasted on an old man like me.”

“You aren’t an old man…”

Just as she said, the chancellor was plump and bearded—the spitting image of a middle-aged man. He’d yet to even reach his fortieth birthday. His face was not conventionally beautiful, but his sharp eyes were very persuasive.

“I’ve been led to believe that you would prefer a strong man. As you can see, I’m not strong in any way, and I already have a wife. However, I am not so base that I’d force you to love me.”

“Strength comes in many forms. The strength of your convictions is a form of strength.”

At a loss for words, the chancellor exhaled before continuing. “Let’s begin with your report on the three heroes. How are they doing?”

“From the reports, it seems that Ryuto is planning to have the first princess and second princess reconcile. Aside from that, they haven’t made any unusual movements.”

“In that case…” The chancellor thought for a moment before continuing. “Well, I don’t believe there’s anything to worry about. You will continue observing them.”

“Understood.”

“What about the other one?”

“There is no change in his behavior, except for the fact that he’s been sleeping more.”

“And what of your plan for him to become a soldier? Is he in accord?”

“He has not refused the idea. I believe he will serve directly under me one day.”

“All right. Then let us try to maintain the current state of affairs.” Expressionless, the chancellor nodded.

After a few more words were exchanged, Aegiana was dismissed. It would be suspicious if the knight captain was missing for too long a time, which might harm the chancellor's plans.

"Aegiana, you've not had a change of heart?"

"I pledged my life to the Rising Sun Kingdom. I will do anything for it."

"Take care of yourself. Your existence as 'Humanity's Strongest' is what gives invaders pause about invading our small country."

"Yes, sir."

"However, you are only human. If you should one day find someone you care for, you may take them as your paramour."

There was a pause.

"…Good night, sir." Aegiana turned around, her expression unchanged from the moment she'd walked into the room, and left.

The chancellor closed his eyes briefly, then raised his outstretched hand in front of him.

"It is all for this country… To follow the witch's will… And to overthrow the rotten queen." The chancellor opened his eyes, and his gaze was piercing. "The sun will rise again."

◇

Teleport!

There was a bright yellow light, and in the next moment, I'd successfully evaded Fenrir's jaws. This was the fifth time. Just because I had wings, though, it didn't mean I could fly. Right now, the best I could do was glide. The time I could buy from this was limited.

Once again, Fenrir's body fell to the ground, sending leaves flying from the trees. Even so, he didn't make a sound. The strong, flexible muscles of his legs absorbed the impact, making his landings silent. Then he faced me again, getting ready to jump at me as soon as I came within range.

I only had two teleports left, and I needed both of them to get back to my room. In other words, if I couldn't actually hurt Fenrir, I should have retreated immediately. But I didn't give a damn about that right now.

Once more, Fenrir jumped at me, his mouth wide open. And this time, I looked down instead of up.

Teleport.

Now on the ground, I waited for Fenrir to fall back down. Since he couldn't detect me, he most likely thought that I'd teleported into the sky again. However, that only lasted for an instant before he noticed where I really was. His sense of smell was really problematic. I had little to no chance of actually ambushing him because of it.

As soon as Fenrir landed, he dashed towards me, but as soon as he did, I teleported myself to where the black wolves were waiting.

"Hmmm?!"

Fenrir immediately changed direction to follow me. As he did this, I pulled the thin black rope, Gleipnir, out from the shadow of the black wolves and yanked on it.

“Shrink.”

I poured magic into Gleipnir, activating its shrinking property. Then, Gleipnir, which had been strung all around the area like a spider’s web, began to constrict, catching Fenrir perfectly in midair—tangling every last part of him in its embrace and stopping his movements completely.

“What is thisss?!”

Fenrir tried to fight back, but no matter how hard he tried, the strings did not break. It really lived up to its name as a legendary rope…or was it a chain? Either way, even with 1000 STR, Fenrir had no chance of breaking through.

“Grrr!”

“You should stop. These strings have been evenly distributed across the forest in a three-hundred-meter radius. There’s no way you’re getting out.”

“When did youuu…?!”

“You didn’t notice because I hid their smell from you.”

I’d made sure that Gleipnir didn’t have a smell, which made it impossible for Fenrir to detect them. The shadow of anything under Conqueror’s influence was linked to my Shadow Storage. This meant that I could use Puppet Master to control not only the knives, but also Gleipnir, which was tied to them. Then, all I had to do was pour magic energy into Gleipnir to trap Fenrir. Omniscience really came in handy here, as it allowed me to see the exact layout of the forest and let me weave Gleipnir precisely through the trees.

Doing this required a lot of concentration, though, which is why I’d decided to stay airborne instead of running around the forest.

Fenrir let out another howl, hardening his fur and firing it as projectiles, but Gleipnir couldn’t be cut by an attack like that.

“All righty, then…” I skipped over to Fenrir’s back. With the Dark Iron Dagger held in both hands, I pierced his large neck, slicing open the nape. I also cut off the fur in that area just in case, so that he couldn’t attack me with it.

Fenrir howled in pain, but I paid him no mind. I buried my head in the stream of fresh blood flowing from the cut I’d made. Apparently, when I began to suck his blood, my Bite Skill activated.

His thick, delicious blood flowed down my throat with every gulp I took. Obviously, it tasted better than anything I’d had so far. It was so rich. This was proof that the more mana, or the stronger the monster, the tastier the blood. Or maybe it was just that the blood of a mythical creature was good in general. That might have been it, honestly, because this blood was divine.

Within the iron smell of hemoglobin, I could taste the flavor produced by the organic matter of natural-born creatures. Then, to top it all off, there was an accent of rich mana. This mellow smell caressed my nose, enticed my appetite, and began making my brain release pleasure chemicals.

There was no gamy taste. It was like eating a gourmet meal—its decadent smell filled my senses. Every gulp of it made the flavor even

deeper on my tongue, revitalizing every last cell in my body. I completely lost myself in his blood.

Doesn't sucking blood sound fun? Don't you want to try? Huh? Huh?! No? Oh.

"That should do it."

I'd finally finished drinking all his blood, so I wiped my face, which had been dyed red as a result of my meal. At once, the sleeve of my shirt started to suck the blood in and begin its self-restoration.

With all his blood drained, Fenrir had gone completely still. With that out of the way, it was time to check my stats. Now that I'd killed something of an extremely high level, I should have leveled up quite a bit...and if I hadn't, I was gonna be pretty bummed. I really wished that there'd be some kind of notification when I leveled up. It'd be so much more convenient.

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Inori Takafuji / Demon (Vampire — Baron-Class) / Lv. 13
HP: 2712/2712(+500+387) / MP: 18334/20070(+5000+0)
STR: 3088(+500+101) / VIT: 2827(+500+94) / DEX: 2513(+500+52)
AGI: 3302(+500+91) / INT: 5010(+1000+42)
Unique Skills: [Growth Boost] [5x Exp Multiplier] [½ Required
Exp] [Eye of True Sight] [Eye of Sigils] [Contempt for the Sun
God] [Vampirism]
[Baron-Class Authority] [Skill Pilfer] [True Dark Magic]
[Armament Craft] [Detect] [Level Up] [Skill Acquisition]
[Monarch Caliber]
General Skills: [Swordsmanship Lv. 5] [Stealth Lv. 5] [Throwing
Arts Lv. 7] [Dagger Arts Lv. 5] [Dropkick Lv. 10] [Swindler Lv.
2] [Flight Lv. 1] [Trapper Lv. 2] [Bite Lv. 2] [Leap Lv. 1]
[Evasion Lv. 2] [Poise Lv. 1] [String Arts Lv. 1]
Titles: Indomitable Soul, Involved Against Will, Ham Actor,
Giant Killer
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I'd gone up five levels, which was a little less than I'd hoped, but still great. My overall stats had risen a decent amount too. The blood I'd drunk seemed to have helped me recover my MP, and it would appear that the bonus stats I received from Vampirism hadn't changed.

On the other hand, I seemed to have gotten a lot of different Skills. Bite and Leap had probably come from the wolves here. Trapper, Flight, Evasion, Poise, and String Arts were probably Skills that I'd received from this battle. *Hmm, maybe it's easier to get Skills during battles? Kinda like getting stronger from fighting.*

Trapper was definitely thanks to the trap I had set for Gleipnir. *I wonder if I can learn how to disarm traps too.*

I'd also gained Monarch Caliber as a Unique Skill—from Fenrir, obviously. Perhaps the fact that I'd received his Divine Blessing meant that I could pilfer Divine Blessings in place of Unique Skills.

Appraisal.

Monarch Caliber: One with authority befitting of a king. Can share power with your underlings, raise their intelligence, and communicate with them without words.

What was the point of having this Skill without underlings? It was worthless to me. If anything, I wished that I'd acquired his long-range attack.

"Master..."

"Hm?"

I turned around to see who had spoken, and standing there before me were the black wolves.

"You can talk?"

"Yes...suddenly."

This must have been because of Monarch Caliber—I could now converse with my thralls. I guess I shouldn't have been too surprised by this, but they talked like Fenrir. At least they didn't have that habit of stretching the last syllable of their words.

"Didja need something?"

"Our former master, who lies at your feet..."

By "former master," they were probably referring to Fenrir—but why'd they have to put it like that?

"You mean Fenrir?"

"Has he perished?"

"Yeah. I killed him."

"In that case, we would like to ask a favor of you," one of the wolves said, looking me in the eye. "Would you be able to make him your thrall?"

"You mean Fenrir?"

"Indeed."

All three wolves nodded in agreement.

"Why? What makes you ask that?" I inquired.

The wolves began to explain.

"He did his utmost to protect us."

"He fought for us."

"And you plan to hunt our former brethren as well, do you not?"

"Well... Yeah, I do."

"Then you should make him your thrall."

"I'm sure it's what he would have wanted."

"He'd want to be with his pack."

Hm... I see. Since Fenrir's wish was to protect them, they wanted me to make all of the wolves my thralls—including Fenrir himself. I was still kinda

surprised by how well spoken they were. It was hard to believe that just a minute ago, they'd been little more than puppets. Turning Fenrir into my thrall worked in my favor, though. I couldn't think of any downsides. He wouldn't be able to attack his master, he wouldn't need to be fed, and I could just keep him in my shadow when I didn't need him. Plus, I could use his long-range attacks and his high stats.

"Okay. I'll do it."

"You have our thanks."

"Thank you, master."

"You have our gratitude."

The black wolves nodded in satisfaction upon hearing my answer and returned to my shadow. The sky was beginning to lighten at this point. It had taken me a lot more time than I'd thought it would to drain his blood. I'd have to wait to make him my thrall, since that process would take even longer. For now, I stored his corpse in my shadow and returned to the castle.

Fenrir's corpse was huge, but I still managed to fit it in my shadow somehow. If I made him my thrall, would he turn black too? If I made every wolf in this forest my thrall, I'd have an army of black wolves. *Maybe I should get a black outfit to match.*

It seemed that defeating Fenrir hadn't made the barrier disappear, which was good. It made this area very convenient for me, since I didn't have to worry about being found while I was inside. Maybe I could use it to raise my Flight Skill.

By sucking Fenrir's blood, I'd recovered most of my mana, so I focused my gaze towards the sky, now a light purple, and teleported there. I then located the castle, searched for my room, and carefully teleported to it.

Chapter 3

"So that's where you come in, Inori," said Ryuto, as we ate together. "Can I count on you?" He bowed for good measure.

Uh, how do I put this...? I don't need a guy "counting on" me. Then again, I had no clue what he was talking about because I hadn't been listening at all. "For what?" I asked.

"Y'know—talking to the first princess."

Uh, right... "And why am I doing that again?"

"We talked about this at lunch yesterday, remember? We wanna help the princesses reconcile."

I had zero recollection of that conversation. All I remembered was sleeping through lunch, so...yeah, there was no way I'd heard a single word they'd said. I was pretty sure I'd given him a thumbs-up at one point, but I hadn't known it was this dumbass plan I'd agreed to. Did they even *need* to reconcile? I guess if they weren't talking to each other, they probably weren't on good terms...

"So why do *I* need to talk to her?"

"Well, you're close to the second princess, aren't you? The rest of us have pretty much never interacted with her, and even if we had, I don't think we'd really be able to understand what she's thinking beneath that Puppet Princess exterior."

"Okay...but I'm not really close to the first princess."

"That's exactly why you're gonna have a talk with her, and then by doing that, you'll be able to get a read on what their relationship is actually like. We'll help out too."

Ew. I don't really wanna talk to that blonde, pigtailed, gratitude-grubbing princess. Besides, I'm still exhausted from taking down Fenrir.

"Why would the first princess even want to talk to a nonhero like me?" I pressed Ryuto.

"I asked her."

"Oh, like when you asked her to let me take a bath?"

"That was different. This time, I turned on the charm."

Uh...you sure you wanna say that in front of Tamaki? She's glaring daggers at you!

In the first place, though, did outsiders like us have the right to interfere in their relationship? Oh, wait—maybe it's precisely *because* we're outsiders that we can stick our noses in like this. If it were anyone else, they'd have to worry about their position in relation to the princesses. Heroes were guaranteed a certain degree of protection...though I wasn't. Hm. It seemed that Ryuto had put a good amount of thought into this, but it was probably naive to imagine that this plan would end with the two princesses holding hands and singing kumbaya...

"What's in it for me, then?"

“Huh? I thought you were gonna help.”

“All I did was give you a thumbs-up. I never said I’d actually help. Sounds like a huge pain.”

“How about…I get you permission to attend the upcoming party?”

“Wait, what party?”

There’s gonna be another party? With what money?!

“For the first princess’s birthday. You haven’t heard? Anyway, that’s when we want them to reconcile.”

“Nope, this is the first time I’m hearing about this.”

A birthday party? I hadn’t known it was even her birthday. Even if I wasn’t invited, Nala could’ve clued me in if she wanted to.

“Are the heroes from neighboring countries coming again?”

“No—only the nobles of this country are invited. Doesn’t seem like they have the leeway to invite outside guests.”

Well, at least that meant that I wouldn’t be surrounded by annoying people if I went. But even so…

“I still don’t really see anything in it for me.”

“Okay, then…I’ll ask the first princess to give you one day off every week.”

“I’m in.”

“That was fast.”

Tamaki was unimpressed. I couldn’t care less what she thought of me, though. A day off meant an entire day just for sleep! *I* love *days off!*

Thus, I’d been successfully drafted into their plan to help the princesses reconcile. The first part of the plan was for me to have a word with the first princess. As much as I already wanted to give up, I was working towards an even nobler cause—my day off. So I just needed to suck it up.

Little did I know, however, that I’d come to regret how flippantly I’d agreed to cooperate… Well, probably. At least a little.

◇

“I’m spending my valuable time talking to a commoner like you. You should be grateful!”

“Can I go home now…?”

“At least talk to her first!”

I had yet to even pass through the doorway, but this had already become incredibly annoying. Giving up was looking more and more attractive by the second. I wanted to leave. I really wished I could’ve ignored the fact that she was a princess and just spoken my mind to her.

“Owww, my stomach! It hurts so bad!”

“That’s such an obvious lie!”

The first princess snorted, then brushed her pigtails aside with one hand, both haughty and graceful. “I give you special permission to enter. You should be grateful.”

“Um, actually, I think I will politely decline…”

"*Enter*!" The first princess grabbed me and forcefully dragged me inside, after which I found myself seated on a needlessly expensive couch.

"So this is the first princess's room…?"

It hardly looked like a place for sleeping. If anything, it looked more like a drawing room—a room for receiving guests—which meant this probably wasn't her actual room. Of course they wouldn't let someone, no matter how weak he was perceived to be, enter the sleeping quarters of a princess.

"Listen—no matter how exciting it is to be in a lady's room, don't go sniffing the air in here! I won't permit it."

"I'm not excited… If anything, I'm surprised."

This room felt completely different from the rest of the castle, which, while still rather grand in some ways, was generally run-down and shabby-looking. In contrast, this room was very flashy, immaculate, and filled with expensive-looking furnishings. The worst part was that there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to what was put in here. It just looked like a hodgepodge of expensive decorations. Then again, this princess did enjoy sparkly things, so it made sense. I was positive that the queen's room would be no different.

"Surely a commoner like you has never laid eyes on such impressive items before. You should be grateful that you're able to enjoy such a splendid sight."

She was right that I hadn't seen stuff like this before, but I wasn't remotely envious. The room was objectively flashy but not aesthetically appealing in the slightest. However, bedrooms were supposed to be places you could fill with the things you like, so I had no reason to disparage her for doing so.

"Did you get all this stuff yourself?" If so, then I could praise her for her fine collection while pretending to be a commoner who couldn't comprehend the magnificence of these items.

"No—these are all gifts from my mother and other important people."

"*All* of it?"

"Obviously! I'm not allowed to leave the castle by myself, least of all to do my own shopping."

Really? Well, that explains why none of these items harmonize with one another. There was little to no chance that gifts from all those different people would be perfectly coordinated to match each other.

"Well…let's leave it at that for now," I said.

"Very well." She cleared her throat lightly. "You should be grateful."

"Shall we discuss what we came here for?"

Though I'm not too sure what to do if there was a breakdown in communication, and her objective today is just to accumulate more gratitude…

"Truthfully, there's no need for me to confer with you about this, so you should be grateful that I'm letting you listen to me."

She was being honest in her own way, which made me shudder a little. Also, I felt as if she could've cut the gratitude stuff and still said what she wanted to say.

"You want to talk about the second princess, right?"

"I don't care about her!"

"Then you want to talk about your bad relationship with her?"

"I have no need to interact with her."

"Then...maybe you're worried about something?"

"I worry about nothing."

"Riiight. This is going nowhere..."

How did her brain work? I was trying to play catch, but she was playing dodgeball. If I couldn't get her to open up, then she'd never actually talk about anything. *Man, what a pain!* I decided to try a different strategy. *I'm counting on you, Ryuto!*

"If this conversation doesn't go anywhere, I'm gonna have to tell Ryuto."

"Huh?!"

"He was nice enough to set up this time for us to sit down and chat, but if you have nothing to say, then I wonder how disappointed he'll be..."

"Y-You... That's underhanded!"

Inori's taunt was super effective!

"So how about we start talking?"

"It seems that an incompetent such as yourself has no choice but to rely on the greatness of Ryuto. You are just like a goblin that borrows the authority of an ogre!"

Huh...that idiom sounded kinda familiar, except the version I knew was about foxes and tigers. Also, apparently, if you wanted to insult someone in this world, you called them a goblin, which was funny because they actually had double the stats of grown men in this world. Despite that fact, they still got clowned on.

Either way, the first princess finally began talking about her circumstances, which turned out to be a lot heavier than I expected. After removing her personal biases from it, the story went like this: When they were little, she had really respected her older sister, but as they grew older, she noticed that the servants were paying her a lot more attention than her sister. Then she became the first princess, which pushed her sister down to be the second princess.

Their difference in status became more apparent to her when she learned that her sister was only her half sister, since the queen was not her mother. Everyone began calling the second princess the "Puppet Princess," and the first princess followed suit, holding her in contempt as well.

Though the first princess was instructed on how to be a princess, the second princess's training had been a lot harder, especially when it came to magic theory. For the first princess, they had put that on the back burner because the amount of mana she had allowed her to cast simple spells without knowing the theory behind them.

When she turned ten, the king started to panic. He'd realized that she couldn't keep being spoiled like this, so he made her education harder. Thus began her lessons in magic theory and its practical applications. But ultimately, the king had no need to worry, because she picked up magic more than twice as fast as most people.

People began to praise her, calling her a genius, but she knew that her older sister had been much more impressive at her age. When her sister cast spells, they were faster and more focused. She was better at the theory too. She got more questions right on tests. She'd even beaten an adult in a practice sword battle. Because of this, the first princess came to the painful realization that she was not above her sister.

The first princess began to distrust the teachers who praised her as a genius. She began to distrust all the smiles on the faces of the servants. It was like she no longer recognized any of the people around her. She felt sick. She couldn't trust anyone. She no longer understood herself, even.

When she turned eleven, she stopped scorning her older sister. Instead, she began thinking about how amazing and talented she was. More than anything, she wanted to call her not "second princess" but "big sister," and be called "little sister" in return.

But before she knew it, a wall had been erected between them. The servants continued disdaining the "Puppet Princess." The second princess stopped showing any emotion, and began distancing herself from the first princess as well. Even when the first princess tried to get close to her, she'd get frustrated, and things never went well. More than anything, she was scared of the smiles of the servants who blocked her path. She couldn't overcome this wall between them no matter what she did.

I desperately wanted to ask the first princess if the girl in the story was really her. The arrogant and haughty behavior that was typical of her had led me to believe that she was anything but the wishy-washy protagonist she'd described. *What happened to the way you act?! Is that the real you or not?!*

But there were parts of the story that I could get behind. It was clear that this room was kinda symbolic. She had said that she'd never done her own shopping before. Everything in this room—actually, everything she had in general—was something that she'd received from someone else. More than likely, the first princess had never gotten or achieved anything on her own. Her entire personality revolved around people giving her things. Her very identity was someone who received things.

It wasn't exactly a solid identity, and the moment she stopped trusting others, she could easily fall apart. But in her case, that hadn't happened. Not yet, at least. Instead, she had clung to her status as the first princess, stopped trusting herself, and begun to act arrogantly. It was the only thing she could do to protect herself. By doing this, she was able to stabilize her identity.

Most likely, the first princess had yet to realize that the feelings she had for the second princess weren't admiration, envy, or jealousy. The two of them were pretty much complete opposites. The first princess had everything handed to her while the second princess got everything she had through her own effort. That's why she couldn't even begin to interact with the second princess.

She might've been less crazy than I thought. She was warped by the people around her…but that's not to say that she didn't have her own faults. Her pride might have contributed to some of these problems.

"Hmph. What, no response? Then again, a commoner's advice won't be useful to me in the slightest."

Even her sour attitude towards me was probably just her copying how everyone else treated me. But what kind of advice could I give her? It may have been possible to make her understand how warped she'd become and fix that, but it would've been beyond annoying. If my main objective was to fix their relationship, though, then maybe I didn't have to fix her personality. I could keep it simple.

"Hm… Well, couldn't you just order her to let you call her 'big sister'? It'd be in character for you, at least."

"Wha… I-I could never say that! Can you imagine how confused the servants would be?!"

"Who cares about them? *You* should be the one deciding whether or not you do something."

The first princess let out a groan of frustration. She must have realized I had a point. If she couldn't trust the people around her, then she was better off ignoring them completely.

"But if I speak to her like that…I might cause her more unnecessary problems."

Yeah? It's a little late for that…

"The second princess isn't as weak as you think."

"Oh… Really?"

Really. I bet she'd be happy…at least, beneath her mask. The first princess began thinking hard about something, and then her face lit up with an apparent realization.

"Wait, you actually give pretty good advice!"

"I don't think so. All I did was tell you to be honest instead of apprehensive about this stupid issue."

"St-Stupid issue?! I knew it! I should never have asked you about this!"

"Uh-huh."

"Why do you sound so uninterested?!" But having yelled this, the first princess let out a quick breath and then calmed down. "W-Well, I suppose I'll take your words into consideration. You should be grateful that I asked for your advice."

"Why?" Now that I thought about it, why *did* she have to demand thanks from everyone? "Why are you gathering gratitude like this?"

“What? You don’t know? Stupid commoner.”

Yeah, I’m pretty sure nobody but you knows the answer.

“Now that I think about it, you’ve never actually voiced any heartfelt gratitude. Very well! I’ll take it upon myself to specially educate you on the importance of gratitude. You should be grateful!”

“‘Gratitude is a line in the sand that separates you from others. It’s a way to show respect to others. It not only strengthens your relationships, but makes clear the distinction between you and others…’ Um, Inori, what is this?” Nala asked as she read my journal.

As it happened, today’s entry was about five times as long as normal.

“It’s the first princess’s Gratitude Manifesto. I had to listen to her enthusiastic explanation for a lot longer than I wanted, which kinda pissed me off. So I decided to copy it down word for word so I can use it in the future.”

“I don’t think I quite understand. How do you intend to use it?”

“I’m thinking of blackmailing her with it in the future when she’s old enough to be embarrassed by it.”

“I’m not quite sure this is the best use of your efforts…”

Nah, I always go all out when I screw with people. All the same, Nala skipped over the Gratitude Manifesto and began reading a normal entry.

“Oh, right. Say, Nala…”

“Yes?”

“I heard that it’s the first princess’s birthday next week.”

“Yes…it is.” She sighed. “What about it?”

Whoa, who took all the wind out of your sails?

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There’s no reason for you to attend the first princess’s birthday party.”

“Oh…” So I really was being excluded.

“I-I’m not saying that you don’t belong there! It’s just that there’s no point in you attending. There’s much flattery and kowtowing, and despite the first princess’s position, a lot of crude dealmaking goes on in the background. Plus, the food and decorations are much fancier than usual, but then they completely ignore the second princess. If that’s the case, then…”

Nala seemed quite pissed. But it made sense, since she was on the second princess’s side…though she shouldn’t really have been taking those feelings to work with her. Nala must have realized she was ranting because she suddenly stopped herself, cleared her throat, and then went on.

“Anyway…the second princess seems to have something she wants to discuss with you tomorrow during class.”

What a sudden change of subject…but I had no reason to stop her from talking about something else. I felt bad for her, after all.

“Hm… Weird. I wonder what she wants.”

“Okay, seriously. What’s going on?”

We were currently in the middle of the bustling shopping district. Everywhere I looked there were vendors. This looked like a place for nobles to shop, and that was reflected by the fact that the shopkeepers weren’t yelling to attract customers.

There certainly were a lot of people, but considering that this was the kingdom’s shopping district, there weren’t as many as I’d expect. At the very least, compared to what I had experienced on the Shibuya Scramble, there weren’t many people at all…although maybe that wasn’t the best comparison.

It was a “beautiful” sunny day today, which made me very glad to be under the strong rays of the sun, being a vampire and all. Next to me were Nala and Sensei, who’d changed her hair to be blonde—the same color as Nala’s.

“This is a part of your studies. Learning about what’s outside the castle walls is very important. Also, we’re concealing our identities, so be sure not to say anything that would give us away, Nala. We’re ‘sisters,’ after all.”

“Yes, Ari.”

“What about me?” I asked.

Nala and Sensei looked at each other in confusion. *Wait, did you guys not consider this?*

“Our…pimp?”

“Our servant?”

“Uh, can we talk about the way you guys treat me?”

Just because I had black hair and thus couldn’t be included in their so-called family didn’t mean they could give up on me entirely. I’m sure they could’ve come up with something.

“Okay, then carry our stuff for us.”

“Hang on, secon—I mean, Lady Ari. Being able to make purchases freely would be a valuable learning experience for me,” I argued.

By the way, I should mention that she’d changed her hair color with a magic tool. Those things sure were useful. Since she hadn’t been the first princess for a long time, nobody really knew what she looked like, so changing her hair color was apparently enough to disguise her.

“Well, then, how about being our bodyguard…not that there’s a single sliver of truth to that.”

“Hey, that’s pretty messed up. Sure, I might not be worth a damn in combat, but still.”

“Excuse me, *bodyguard*. Shouldn’t you speak more politely?”

“…”

I hate this. Then again, I *was* wearing knight’s clothes, so it wouldn’t be too strange for me to be their escort. I could use Detect to sense threats too.

“So what are you shopping for, Lady Nala, Lady Ari?”

“We haven’t made any firm plans yet, but perhaps some accessories?” Sensei—I mean, Ari—replied.

Also, I only just realized this, but wasn’t it kinda unnatural for her to address a bodyguard so politely? But maybe it would be unnatural for her to *not* speak like that. At the very least, her expression had relaxed a little bit. Nala didn’t react or even look surprised, so she must have known that the second princess was capable of making different expressions, or maybe she was just hiding her surprise behind her maid’s poker face.

“I had no clue that the two of you did this sort of thing,” I said.

“What sort of thing?”

“Shopping.”

It felt like they were more used to this than they should have been. I’d already thought as much, judging by their outfits, how they’d escaped the castle, and how she’d used the magic tool to change her hair. It all seemed like second nature to them, and if they were doing it together, they must have been rather close. The king and queen probably had no idea that they were slipping out like this.

But what she said next threw me off.

“No—this is our first time.”

“Really? Doesn’t seem like that at all. You seem so accustomed to sneaking out.”

If they’d never done this before, that meant that this excursion must have been carefully planned down to the last detail, with everything prepared in advance.

“That’s not a very kind way of describing our activities today…but I suppose it’s true that we’re doing something that we’re not supposed to be doing.”

Exactly. If anyone found out, it’d be a big problem. To be honest, the fact that she’d snuck out today was completely out of line with her image. As the Puppet Princess, she shouldn’t have been doing anything of her own will. If anyone discovered that she’d snuck out, the fact that her Puppet Princess image was all an act would be exposed. What was so important out here that she’d risk it all like this?

“We’re about to enter a shop. Please do not wander off.”

“Sure.”

I surveyed the kingdom with Omniscience whenever I got bored, so I knew its layout better than anyone. Besides, I wasn’t too curious about anything here anyway.

I entered the simple-looking ornament shop behind Nala and Sensei. Most of the items in here were accessories that had gems in them. Sensei looked through the display pieces in the window with Nala right next to her.

While they did that, I used Appraisal on various items in the shop, and compared their actual value to the price that was listed. Surprisingly, there didn’t seem to be any fake or overpriced items. It was just a normal, honest store. Though there weren’t any dangers in the shop, I was still their

bodyguard, so I couldn't stray too far from them. I was able to easily appraise all the accessories without leaving their side by using Omniscience in tandem with Appraisal. I was using my skills for a good cause.

After a little bit of looking around, Sensei seemed to be torn between two accessories, sometimes asking Nala for her opinion. It looked like Nala was advising her not to buy them. Though the shop had relatively good prices, they weren't low enough that a maid could buy them on her salary. Also, wasn't this supposed to be a learning experience for me? Why weren't they interacting with me at all? If anything, it seemed like Sensei had just wanted to buy accessories. If that was the case, though, then there was no need for her to have included me in her plans, certainly not just for buying one measly accessory.

Sensei turned to me. "Inori, which do you think is better?"

"Um…I think this one suits you better, Lady Ari."

"Oh, this isn't for me…"

Hm? Not for her? Then… Ah—I see.

"For your little sister's birthday?"

She flinched. There was no reason for her to react so violently, though. She'd brought me here for this purpose, so what was the point of trying to hide it now? Oh—maybe she'd reacted to me calling the first princess her little sister. I had intentionally avoided saying "first princess" so as not to blow our cover, but apparently calling her her "little sister" was no good either.

"Th-That's right. You met her the other day, didn't you, Inori? Which do you think she'll like more?" she asked, her face slightly flushed.

"How should I know? I only talked to her a little bit yesterday."

"But you're pretty perceptive when it comes to people, aren't you?"

She's quite observant, but also not entirely correct.

"I can make educated guesses about how people might feel, but I've never shared their feelings."

"Huh?"

"It's been like that for as long as I can remember. Whenever people felt happy or sad, I never felt the same. It got me into a lot of sticky situations, so I learned to understand people better because it was annoying otherwise."

Although, when I say that I didn't "feel the same," it was mostly just me not having any interest in their feelings.

"I can only understand emotions and thoughts logically, so I'm not entirely sure what will actually make her happy."

Sensei puffed out her cheeks a little. "Fine, then *I'll* choose."

"But I will say this—she's used to getting things from people. She might not be too excited to receive something from you right now."

"What? Are you saying that buying a present is pointless, then?" she asked, puffing her cheeks out even more.

She looks like a chipmunk. I want to poke her cheeks.

“All I’m saying is that she’s used to getting presents that are designed to make her happy. I think you should just give her something that *you* want to give her.”

“Oh…” she murmured. She put back the two accessories she was holding and went for another one.

The one she held now was one that she’d picked up earlier, but then pretended to not be interested in. As Nala and I watched over her, we whispered to each other.

“You’re very kind, Inori.”

“I wasn’t trying to be.”

“You’re not very honest, are you?”

“No, I’m being serious. Doesn’t it annoy you when two people who have the same feelings for each other don’t confess?”

“Well, personally, I don’t think she had to go out of her way to buy a gift for the likes of that girl.” Nala let out a sigh.

You really have it out for her…

“I must thank you, though,” Nala continued.

“I didn’t do much. I just gave her a push.”

“No—you’ve done more than that today.”

Huh? What else did I do today? I’ve only gone shopping with you guys.

“I’m sure that the reason that Lady Ari can be like this is thanks to you. She’s probably never even thought of leaving the castle because the queen has forbidden her from doing so. She’s never truly considered buying the first princess a birthday present until now.” Then Nala gave me a playful smile. “What was it you said? ‘If you can’t take the high road, take the low road.’”

“Ah…” I covered my face with a hand.

It would seem that Sensei told Nala about the conversation we had—I had no idea they were this close. At any rate, Miss Loose Lips seemed to have finished her purchase and came back to us.

“Hey, sis, I’m done. Let’s go to the next place.”

“Of course, Ari.”

“I’m so glad you were able to make your purchase, Lady Ari of the loose lips.”

“Inori, you may have helped me out…but ‘I’m not gonna thank you. It’s not really my style.’” She shot me a sarcastic smile.

Wow, the Uno reverse. Not bad.

Sensei turned on her heel and marched out of the shop with Nala right behind her. As we walked out, I couldn’t help but think that it was very much like her to buy a birthday present for her little sister despite all the risks that came with it.

Five days later, it was time for the first princess’s birthday party. This was the first time I was a guest at one of these events…even if I was dressed in servant’s clothes and was technically part of the help. But surprisingly, it

was a pretty lax gathering, so I didn't have too many restrictions on what I could and couldn't do. Though I did try to stay away from the food because I had no clue which dishes had garlic in them.

It was, however, pretty annoying to have Detect in this situation because it enhanced my sense of smell, meaning I could smell every last one of the fragrances that the guests were wearing. Citrus, rose, lavender—they all just kind of melded together into one big fragrance soup. *All right. Never coming to one of these things again.*

Sitting on their thrones at the end of the hall were the queen and king, with the knight captain standing guard next to them. It didn't seem like they had any of the imperial guards here, which was surprising to me.

The first princess was surrounded by the three heroes and some servants. She was wearing a very flashy dress and had some makeup on. But she was still only eleven, so it just looked like she was playing dress-up.

"First Princess, the dress really suits you."

"Thank you, Ryuto!" The first princess smiled, or rather grinned, her face slightly red.

Ryuto's comment was definitely entirely lip service, but from the way she was acting, it seemed like she took it to heart. In fact, it seemed as if she was in love with him. *Ryuto, didn't you say that she wasn't at that point yet?*

Ryuto was wearing a suit instead of his usual knight's clothes. *Good-looking guys can really pull anything off.* Tamaki and Aoi were wearing red and blue dresses, respectively. The last time they had worn dresses, it had looked as if someone had prepared their clothes for them, but this time they looked very natural and beautiful.

At that moment, the second princess approached the first princess. This surprised not just the first princess but the servants as well. Ryuto and the others looked a little worried by their reactions. *You guys really wear your hearts on your sleeves. You could learn a thing or two from Sensei's perfect poker face.*

"Happy birthday, First Princess."

"Hmph. You should be grateful that you were allowed to attend my party."

Wow, they really are acting distant, as they always do. It wasn't even because there were a lot of people watching. This was just how they always acted towards each other. *Stop glaring, servants!*

"I have a gift for you to celebrate your special day."

"A g-gift?!" Suddenly, the first princess smiled widely, unable to hide her happiness.

"Yes—I believe it is a present that suits you."

"Oh, I see... Okay. Show it to me."

"Here you are."

The second princess had bought her two simple silver hair clips—one for each pigtail, with a small gem set in each one.

"Wow, how shabby."

"She can't even choose a gift correctly."

"It's so plain... How could she say that it suits the first princess?"

The servants spoke to each other in low voices so that nobody could overhear them...but I could, thanks to the enhanced hearing Detect gave me. How could they be so rude as to bad-mouth someone right in front of them? Straighten up!

"These are for me?"

"Yes."

The first princess exhaled slightly before a wide smile spread across her face. "Thank you."

She said it in such a small voice, but it was loud enough that the servants behind her overheard, making them gasp. Then, she proceeded to give the hair clips to a servant.

"Put them on for me."

"B-But Second Princess—"

"*Now*."

Unable to defy a direct order, the servant reluctantly helped the first princess put them on. They may have been simple in design, but her beautiful blonde hair was reflected in their gleaming silver surfaces. The

first princess possessed a lot of flashy golden items, but these hair clips stood out amongst them. *Not bad, Sensei. They look better on her than I thought they would.*

"What do you think, Ryuto?" the first princess asked, turning around.

"They're very beautiful."

"I see…"

That was how he really felt. The simplicity of the design somehow made her seem more mature. The first princess smiled sheepishly and then turned to Sensei.

"Thank you very much!"

Her smile was so childlike. *Wow, I didn't know you could make that kind of expression.* As for Sensei, she was smiling like usual, but the corners of her mouth were raised higher than before.

"Can I ask for one more thing?" The first princess looked at Sensei.

"What is it?"

The first princess looked like she had to prepare herself for what she was going to say next. She faltered a little before finally getting the words out. "Can I call you 'big sister'?"

Sensei's smile disappeared, and in its place, an expression of confusion surfaced. *I guess that was too much of a surprise for her to hide.* Meanwhile, the servants let out gasps of shock and bewilderment.

Honestly, though, if they really wanted to break down the barriers between them, the two of them should've addressed the way they talked to each other long before this.

"Yes...I'd be delighted for you to call me that."

"Big sister!"

Sensei looked stunned for a second but responded with a gentle smile. In the next moment, the first princess jumped up to hug her, which only further confused the servants. Ryuto and the others looked both happy and relieved. Looking further around the room, I saw that the king and queen were...crying?! *Both* of them were seriously crying!

"Good for you, Amanda…"

"Dear, she's thrown that name away already… Still, I'm so glad for her."

These two were nothing but stupid, doting parents. Just as I had that revelation, Ryuto walked over, waving at me.

"Thanks for your help, Inori. Sorry we couldn't do more."

"It's all good. Since I did ninety percent of the work, though, I'd like more compensation."

"Ha ha, I'll think about it." Ryuto grimaced, and then his face turned serious again. "I'm really grateful. It was hard to see her suffering like that. It also made me sad."

God, you're too damn nice if that made you sad too.

"For me, it was just a huge pain in the ass. Glad it's all over now."

“Heh. That’s just like you.” Ryuto turned his eyes back to the queen, who was still crying. “I was worried when we were summoned, but I think we’ll do just fine in this country.”

I didn’t say anything.

“The queen, the first princess, the second princess—everyone’s nicer than they look.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that their country’s in a financial crisis.”

“Well, I’m sure that can be fixed with some kind of isekai shenanigans.”

“Cheats like that are a lot harder to pull off than you think.”

“We’ll make it work.”

“Do what you want. I’mma do the same.”

“If possible, I’d like you to stay…”

I sighed and then began to walk out of the venue.

“What’s wrong?” Ryuto asked.

“I’m gonna get some air. It reeks in here.”

“What are you, a dog? Well, don’t worry—I’ll be sure to ask the first princess about your reward.”

I raised my hand as if to say “okay,” went to the doors, gave the guards a quick explanation, and then exited.

As I stood on the balcony, the warm evening air blew across me. The sun was poised to set in about two hours. Just like in our world, the sun rose in the east and set in the west. My shadow was long and slender, and as much as it would’ve been fun to manipulate it with shadow magic, I couldn’t until the sun had completely set. At most, I could only use my Shadow Storage.

I leaned on the balcony railing, resting my head in my hand as I gazed at the sun. Though I’d come outside to escape the overwhelming smells, being outside and in direct contact with the sun was just as painful. As I was thinking about going back inside, I noticed a girl standing behind me. I turned around.

“Inori.”

“Second Princess…”

She bowed her head and approached me, taking up a place next to me against the railing.

“What’s up?”

“I wanted to thank… No. It’s nothing. I just wanted to chat.”

She sounded like she was having fun, but the usual fake smile was back on her face.

“Just speak plainly with me. There’s no one around. Nobody’s eavesdropping or anything.”

“You know that because of Detect? What a useful Divine Blessing.”

“Yeah—it’s all I’m good for.”

“I’m sure that’s not the case.” She pressed her hand against her mouth and elegantly giggled. The rays from the setting sun made her face shine even more than usual.

“Seeing you like this really reminds me that you’re a princess.”

“Have you thought I wasn’t this entire time? What did you think I was, then?” she asked, puffing out her cheeks like a child.

“Yeah, you really are cute.”

“I don’t need your flattery. You probably think me a boring woman, don’t you?”

“Well, your appearance definitely gives off that impression, but…” I glanced at her and noticed that she looked a little bit down. *That actually bothered her.* “That’s just because of the mask you wear all the time. Your true smile that’s hidden behind all of your blank fake smiles is really cute.”

Sensei’s face grew bright red, though it was probably just the setting sun. But actually, since I’m not a dense protagonist, I obviously knew that wasn’t the case. The things I’d done up till now had probably raised her affection levels to at least “interested.” *At some point, I gave up on avoiding these affection-raising situations.*

“I don’t want to be called blank by *you*, of all people,” she shot back in a whisper, saying something that made very little sense…to me, at least.

“Huh? Me? Blank?”

“You don’t hide your expressions or wear fake smiles, right?”

“Well, no. I don’t see the point.”

“Precisely! And that’s why you’re actually more expressionless than you think. Though at least it’s not like you just have a stony face all the time.”

“Wait…really?”

It’s true that I haven’t really paid attention to my expression. I’m pretty sure I was smiling while fighting Fenrir, but apart from that, I can count on my fingers the few times I’ve actually smiled.

“Have you always been this sharp-tongued?” I asked.

“Heh heh.” She laughed triumphantly like a child who had successfully pulled off a prank. Her face in the rays of the setting sun somehow looked so free, so light, and so cheerful.

◇

A certain man approached the queen, whose eyes were still puffy from crying. “Are you enjoying the party, dear queen?”

“Oh, Chancellor. Yes, I am in a great mood,” she said, chuckling.

A fake smile surfaced on the chancellor’s face. “Excellent. I’m glad you were able to see something nice before your end.”

“My end? What—”

“Ch-Chancellor! What are you—”

“Apologies, my king.”

“Knight Captain?! What are you saying?! Why—”

The sounds of a sword twice slicing flesh rang out across the once noisy party venue. Then silence washed over it as the heads of the king and queen rolled across the floor.

A woman's scream rang out across the hall. What followed was a chain reaction of commotion and chaos—and standing in the middle of it all was the first princess, pale and frozen in place.

"Th-The queen!"

"What have you *done*?!"

"Silence, scum!" the chancellor roared, his expression fierce, shutting up all the nobles. A quiet had fallen over the hall before he spoke again. "Here lies the foolish queen who exhausted our country's resources, bankrupting us and endangering our people…and the foolish king who neglected to stop her."

The chancellor swung his sword to the side, casting off the blood that stained it. This sword had seen many a battle from when the chancellor had fought on the front lines, before retiring due to injury. Though he was now a civilian, he was just as noble as he had been back then.

"From this day forward, I, Bitrei, shall be your new king, and Aegiana your queen. Together, we will heal this country!"

They had staged a coup d'état and announced the end of the matriarchy. It was a revolution.

Aegiana swung her blade, flinging the blood off of it before taking her place beside the chancellor. A fleck of blood landed on the first princess's cheek. She found herself wondering, idly, where the blood had come from, and whose blood it was—before it dawned on her that it was the blood of her murdered parents.

The head of her mother who had showered her with warm, loving smiles, and the head of her father, ever strict and yet kind and protective, now rolled across the floor like so much garbage. At the sight of her parents—the only two people she had trusted—lying dead on the floor, the first princess fell to her knees. It was because of their pure, unadulterated love for her, free of any ulterior motives, that she'd been able to put up such a front.

But now that they were gone…she'd never feel their love again. There was no one left for her. She was a nobody. She didn't know where she was anymore, or even *who* she was, because her parents had been slain by that cur.

Yet in the midst of her despair and this creeping loss of self, there still burned a fire in her, a flame that propelled her forward. Perhaps it was stoked by the instinct to repudiate the one who would deny her very existence. Still kneeling, the first princess began mentally drawing a magic circle as fast as she could—one for her strongest and quickest offensive magic. In the next moment, a purple light began to trace out a magic circle around her.

With all eyes on the chancellor, nobody—not even the heroes or the chancellor himself—noticed the magic circles that had appeared around the first princess… Nobody except Aegiana Itze. She'd sensed the magic circles before they had even begun to form.

Aegiana poured mana into the armor she was wearing—itself a magic tool called Magic Armor Manual—allowing her to close in on the first princess in an instant. There was a gleam of light as she unsheathed her sword, and in the next moment the magic circles that had begun to form disappeared once again as Aegiana sliced through them.

The first princess's eyes widened in shock. Physical attacks should not have been able to affect magic circles, and yet somehow Aegiana's blade had cut through them cleanly. It was enough to make the first princess forget the situation she was in, if only temporarily, especially since the blade had come close enough to slice off one of her golden pigtails. Her hair fell to the floor, along with the silver hair clip that she'd received as a present.

Then the first princess let out a gasp. She'd finally gotten a good look at the blade, and she realized what it was—Aegiana was wielding a katana-shaped Artifact.

She looked back at Aegiana, then at the chancellor, who was visibly shaken but still maintaining his cool. "We are the descendants of the witch!" he declared. "We are her people, and we stand on our own two feet! It is absurd for us to be subordinate to the authority of fools who would rely on otherworlders to save us from our predicament! Our witch served one hero, not many!"

Aegiana thrust her sword towards the first princess's throat.

"Despite having the witch's blood flowing in their veins, our foolish former queen and king who allowed this summoning to take place, and their daughter, who carried out their wishes, have turned their backs on the will of the witch. Theirs is a sin that cannot be absolved, even by death! Therefore, we shall return them to the witch for her judgment!"

That was enough to snap Ryuto out of his trance. He dashed at Aegiana, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Captain! *Stop*!!!"

"Kill her."

He didn't make it in time. The chancellor's detached command rang out before Ryuto could reach the first princess, and the cold steel of Aegiana's blade sliced clean through the first princess's neck. As her head fell to the ground, she heard the person she loved screaming out as he rushed to her side. Her head hit the floor, then tumbled through the air again, and she saw the gift from her sister in front of her. The sight of it was enough to make a vague sense of fulfillment wash over her. Ryuto seized her small body at the instant that her head was severed from it.

◇

Hm? What's going on in the party hall...? I've got a bad feeling about this.

"What's the matter, Inori?"

"Something's happening."

Using the super hearing that Detect gave me, I picked up a slight commotion. I could also sense the party hall filling with mana. I tried to use Omniscience next to see what was really going on, but for some reason the doors were closed. That wasn't enough to keep me out, though. Far-sight and Clairvoyance let me see through the doors, and then...

"What?!"

"Wh-What happened? What's go—"

But before Sensei could finish that sentence, I covered her mouth and pulled her against the wall. It'd be bad if we made too much noise.

From what I could see, the queen and king had been reduced to corpses, and the chancellor and the captain were standing there with their swords bloodied.

I began to whisper into Sensei's ear. "Please, stay quiet. I think...no, I'm sure...that the king and queen are dead."

All the color drained from Sensei's face. With my hand over her mouth, I could feel that she wanted to scream. I knew that even in the best-case scenario, telling her the truth could cause her to panic, and in the worst-case scenario, she might faint, but I believed in her strength.

"They were killed by the knight captain and the chancellor. My guess is that this is a coup."

Judging from their bloodstained swords, I couldn't think of any other possibility. For the moment, I ignored Sensei as she struggled in my arms, and continued observing the party hall. The chancellor was making a declaration, and thanks to him opening his mouth so wide, it was easy to read his lips. *He's calling himself the new king? Yeah, this is a coup.*

Then, the first princess seemed to be trying to do something, but at that same moment, the knight captain closed in on her with speed that rivaled Fenrir's. *Now what...?*

"Ah..."

From the sound of my voice, Sensei must have realized something was wrong. She stopped struggling and looked at me with tears in her eyes. I spoke.

"The first princess was just killed..."

At this pronouncement, Sensei let out a voiceless scream. *Damn it!* She had begun using magic to enhance her physical abilities, which made her about two and a half times stronger than she usually was. Since my stats were reduced to a tenth of their normal values during the day, I was at a big disadvantage. I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold her back.

"Hey! Calm down! What would you accomplish by going in there?!"

Even so, she continued to struggle.

"The doors to the hall are closed, and the knight captain is there. Plus, it's highly likely that all the knights are working for the chancellor now. Do you really think you can accomplish anything by yourself?!"

At last, she stopped flailing around, and a single tear fell from one of her blue eyes. I went on.

“This country’s done for.”

The only reason the people of the country stayed in line despite the financial crisis was their intense faith in the witch. It was that very faith that had led them to follow the rule of the queen...but now that the queen, the king, and the first princess were dead, it was only natural for the knights of this country to transfer their loyalties to the chancellor.

Sensei had neither the charisma nor the popularity to turn this situation on its head. She also didn’t have the strength. Not that it mattered—fighting would only have made things worse.

“I don’t know what the chancellor’s planning to do now, without the weight of the witch’s blood behind his words...but at the very least, it’s clear that this is it for your country.”

Sensei had stopped fortifying her own strength with magic, and I could tell by checking her status that her MP levels were no longer decreasing. I wasn’t sure if this was because she had calmed down or if she’d simply given up, but either way, there was no reason to restrict her movement anymore.

Her eyes were trembling, but they weren’t filled with despair. There was still a glimmer of reason within them. However, the color had yet to return to her skin, and her lips were quivering. Looking on the verge of tears, she turned to me and spoke.

“You’re not lying about any of this...right?”

“I’m telling you exactly what my powers told me. It’s up to you whether you believe me or not...but I will never lie to you.”

“Right... That’s right...” Sensei’s head drooped. Then, it was as if a dam had broken, and tears began to pour from her blue eyes. Shaking, she curled into a ball, clutching at her knees. In a small, plaintive voice, she cried out, “What should I do...?”

That was a good question—not just for her, but for the kingdom as well.

“Well, first of all... Given that the chancellor killed the first princess without a second thought, it’s likely that he’s found an alternative source of mana. It also means that if you’re caught, you’ll probably be killed too. You’re a loose end since you have a claim to the throne, and I doubt he wants you hanging around.”

This country could barely function without mana, and if they were executing a snap revolution like this, then they had to have some kind of plan. Using people as mana slaves was illegal, so they must have found another source. If I had to guess, it was the captain herself. In terms of MP alone, she overwhelmingly outranked the first princess. With her as the queen, they wouldn’t have any mana problems... It might even improve the situation.

“The question is—how’s he gonna convince the devout believers of the witch?”

“Um...” Sensei, who’d been quiet until now, spoke up in a small voice. “The chancellor...he has royal blood too.”

“What?!”

“It should be quite dilute, though…”

“Ah… Welp, this is over.” He’d met the minimum requirements. “That leaves you with just two choices…” Though really, there was only one. “Surrender—or run. Do you wanna live or die?”

For a moment, Sensei froze. Then she spoke. “What if we ask the heroes for their help?”

“Not an option. You know as well as I do that the captain purposefully held off on teaching us how to use magic tools.”

“You realized that…?”

“It was just a feeling I had. Either way—no matter how strong the hero, they’re not gonna be able to win against an army of people wielding those tools.”

Not knowing about the tools meant that we didn’t know how to fight against them either. Was there a single person who could have mounted such a defense while being this clueless? I can say with absolute certainty that it was impossible.

◇

Ryuto gripped the corpse of the first princess, feeling the weight of it in his hands. He let out a wail of sorrow and confusion as he cradled her body. The chancellor merely gave him a cold stare before turning to the knights.

“Those who would walk with us and follow the path of the witch, slay the nobles. Let none of these vermin escape!”

At this declaration, the nobles began to cry out in panic.

“Also, capture the savages—these *otherworlders*, who have desecrated our witch’s sacred lands.”

Tamaki and Aoi had been in a stupor, but the sight of Ryuto and the first princess seemed to bring them back to their senses.

“P-Please wait, Chancellor—I mean, Your Majesty!” one of the nobles cried out.

“What is it?”

“It is understandable that the heroes—I mean, the foolish trio—have been designated for capture…but why must we be killed as well?! We have merely ruled over our lands in accordance with the witch’s will. There’s no reason for this!”

The chancellor glared back at the one who had spoken. “Do you think we’re ignorant of what you’ve done?” he growled.

“What…?”

“You’ve been standing right alongside the royal family, driving this country into ruin with your embezzlement, bribery, exorbitant taxes, needless extravagance, and discrimination!”

The nobles gasped in surprise. There weren’t as many of them here as usual, but the ones who *were* present were the most powerful, with deep ties to the royal family. It made sense that it was they who squeezed their

subjects, using the money obtained as bribes that would give them access to the royal family.

“I have ruled that those who came here tonight do not deserve to live. Do you really think that, knowing the truth of the matter, I’d lend an ear to your sniveling excuses?”

Ashen-faced, the nobles began to shake as the knights drew their swords. Aoi, quite pale herself, buried her face in Tamaki’s chest. Tamaki trembled as she wrapped her arms around Aoi.

Only Ryuto reacted differently. “Screw you…” His voice was so low, a gust of wind could’ve drowned it out. “*Screw* you! What the hell?! Nobody *deserves* to die!” By the time he reached the end of this sentence, he was bellowing, tears streaming from his eyes as he shot to his feet.

All eyes fell upon him. Was this perhaps the charisma of a hero? Or was this his inherent charm? But, unimpressed, the chancellor merely sighed, and shot him an icy glare.

“You are young, hero. Do you not realize that everyone dies someday? It matters not if it is by natural causes, an accident, illness, suicide, torture, or an execution. Death is simply a matter of time. *Everyone* dies…whether they ‘deserve it’ or not.”

“Th-That’s mere sophistry…” Ryuto found that he could not rebuke the chancellor. This was not because the chancellor’s argument was sound, but because he was overwhelmed by the strength of will in the chancellor’s words and gaze. It was so overpowering that having even the slightest seed of doubt in his heart made Ryuto falter.

Aegiana took a step towards Ryuto.

“People die, Ryuto. Nobody lives forever.”

“C-Captain…?”

“That’s why humans must search for a reason to live, rather than finding meaning in death.” Aegiana took another step towards him.

“Aegiana—enough of this farce. Capture the three heroes,” the chancellor said monotonously.

“Understood.” She continued advancing towards Ryuto, unsheathing a different blade than the one she’d used to cut off the first princess’s head. It emitted a silvery gleam as it left its sheath, as if signaling a group of the knights to immediately surround the heroes, moving in to capture them. The others began cutting down the nobles.

“Ryuto! Hurry! Come!” These three little words fell from Aoi’s lips in a desperate scream as she erected a barrier to defend them from the swords of the knights. But Ryuto was not in a position where he could reach them.

“Aoi! Let down your barrier for a second!” Tamaki said. In the same instant, she produced a magic circle. “Light Machine Gun!” This was an original spell of Tamaki’s creation that shot out a hail of light bullets faster than the eye could see, and she was aiming it at Aegiana.

But by the thinnest of margins, Aegiana easily evaded the barrage.

“What?! How did she dodge all of them from this close? There’s no way to predict the trajectory of every single bullet. That’s the advantage of this spell!”

Tamaki had already weakened the spell so as to avoid unnecessary casualties. If she’d put any more power into it, there was no telling what kind of damage she could have caused.

“Aoi! Can you make a barrier in front of Ryuto?!”

“No! This is the best I can do! Their swords are heavier than I thought!”

The knights were wielding magic tools called “Magic Armor Auto,” which granted their users enhanced strength, giving their sword blows more force. It took everything Aoi had to hold them off, especially without magic tools of her own.

Meanwhile, Aegiana continued her advance, finally arriving in front of Ryuto.

“The healing magic of the Maccad Empire—the Suzerain of the Federation Alliance—can apparently heal severed limbs over time. As such, I will cleanly cut off your arms and legs and throw you into a cell. Hold still, Ryuto, or you will only make things worse for yourself.”

Red flames danced around her silvery blade. In her mind, this was a form of mercy. By using this blade that could swiftly cut through anything, she’d spare them from excruciating pain.

The moment that she pulled back her sword to swing it down on him, however, Ryuto, still gripping the body of the first princess, growled in a low voice, “What about *her*?! She had so much more life to live! Do you think *she* found a reason to live?!” Then he uttered one more phrase. “*Limit Breaker*.”

When Aegiana’s blade fell, it encountered no resistance whatsoever. She had only cut air—Ryuto had dodged the blow. “Hm…”

Aegiana had not witnessed his movement with her eyes. However, her instincts were telling her that Ryuto’s abilities had skyrocketed.

“I can’t die yet.” He spoke these words as if denying everything that Aegiana had said to him.

A yellow light surrounded Ryuto from the activation of his Divine Blessing, as he continued to grip the corpse of the princess.

◇

“Surrender, or run…” Sensei repeated these words, mulling it over.

Though these were the only two options for her, *I* had two more. One was to wait until sunset, which was in about two hours. If I did that, I could easily get past all the guards by teleporting. The only problem was that, given that the knights numbered in the thousands, there was no way I could evade them for two whole hours. It was incredibly risky.

The second option was to go to the chancellor. Since, technically speaking, I wasn’t a hero, my existence shouldn’t have been public knowledge. Plus, I had a very useful ability in Detect. There was a chance I’d be spared. But there were two problems with this approach. One, I’d

lose my freedom, and two, there was no guarantee that he'd even accept. Worst case, I might be locked up. *Maybe I could join the knights or something. The knight captain* did *say that I should go to her when I was out of options, and she'd let me into the knights... Oh...*

"Sheesh..." So *that* was what she had meant by that little offer?

Thinking it over, everything she'd done up till now made sense. She hadn't taught the heroes about magic tools in order to have an advantage over them. She had the title of "Betrayer" because she had been plotting to backstab us. And most likely, it wasn't the queen who had kept the heroes under constant observation, but the chancellor. I couldn't believe I didn't catch on sooner.

But that didn't matter anymore. At the very least, I knew where I stood with the captain. If I went to her, I could probably become a knight. I glanced at Sensei. If I gave her to them, perhaps I could earn their trust. In that case, maybe I could turn that option into a low-risk, high-reward situation. But before I made a decision, I wanted to know what hers would be and act accordingly.

"We don't have much time," I told her. "The castle's being surrounded by knights. They must have realized by now that you're not in the hall with the others. It's only a matter of time before they find you here."

She was silent.

"Well, I guess if you have a death wish, you could go out in a blaze of glory and charge in there to get revenge, but..."

"No—it's fine. I've made up my mind." Sensei looked right into my eyes. Though she was still pale, she wasn't trembling anymore. "I will run. I will run and survive."

"How do you know you'll be able to?"

"Because I'll be the one forging my own path."

"It's not unlikely that the knights will catch you..."

"I'll kill them all. I'm more than ready to kill my former countrymen." There was no hesitation in her words.

"You don't want revenge?"

"The king was a kind father to me. And no matter what else happened between us, the queen still raised me as her own. The first princess was sweet...and at the end of it all, she finally became a sister to me." She pursed her lips. "Of course I harbor hatred for the chancellor, and would like nothing more than to kill him with these very hands, but..." As she spoke, I could feel the corners of my mouth curling upwards. "*I* will choose how I die, and no one else!"

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Second Princess—no... Ariya. I will run away with you. We're gonna live."

"...Yes. We are."

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Amidst the screams of the nobles, Aegiana and Ryuto faced each other.

"So you've activated your Divine Blessing, Ryuto?"

Ryuto did not respond; he merely stuck his hand out in front of him. “Light Sword.” A magic circle appeared on Ryuto’s palm, and then a sword made of light began to emerge from it.

This was the spell that he was most skilled at. It usually took a lot longer to activate and required an incantation to boot, but Limit Breaker elevated his physical abilities to twice their normal values, allowing him to activate this spell instantly. He also cast a body fortification spell. The spell enhanced his strength by a factor of 1.5, meaning that he was currently at three times his normal strength.

“Let’s do this.”

In the next instant, it was as if he had disappeared. Most people would not have been able to perceive what had just happened, but he’d leapt forward at incredible speed, swinging the sword down with superhuman force.

Aegiana grunted as she caught the blow with her blade. They were nearly equal, but Ryuto was a little bit stronger. She took a step back and then forcefully repelled him, but that created an opening for Ryuto that he didn’t waste. He thrust his sword at the gap in her armor. She tried unsheathing her other sword—the katana—to block it, but her footing was unbalanced.

Ryuto was positive that he had her—but in the next moment, the katana moved faster than ever before, and cut right through Ryuto’s Light Sword, which was fast, but had little power behind it.

“Wha—” Ryuto’s sword fell apart, scattering particles of light. At that moment, Aegiana regained her poise and swiftly swung her blade again.

“Light Sword!” Once more, Ryuto manifested his sword, but upon taking a hit from Aegiana’s blade, it dissipated immediately. “Light Sword! Light Sword! Light Sword!” As they clashed, Ryuto manifested his blade of light over and over again, but each time it met with Aegiana’s, it would break. The space around them filled with the light from his broken blades, making for quite the display.

Ryuto knew that if this kept up, he was done for. He stopped manifesting his blade, instead trying to distance himself from Aegiana.

“Fool!”

But in that very brief moment, Aegiana landed a kick on Ryuto’s stomach. He flew away, slamming into a wall.

“Gah…!” Confused at first, Ryuto was soon clutching his stomach in agony.

“Why are you holding back? Deciding not to kill me will be the death of your friends.”

Ryuto gasped. He looked behind Aegiana and saw several knights binding Tamaki and Aoi with rope.

“Tamaki! Aoi!”

“It’s a special rope that seals magic. Your friends will no longer be able to cast any spells. It would seem that while you spent all your attention on

me, my subordinates did a fine job." Aegiana let out a sigh. "What was your plan? Did you want to get revenge? Did you want to prove me wrong? Did you want to defend your friends? Did you want to make sure nobody died? It's because you couldn't commit to your convictions that you failed."

Ryuto realized that she was right. He hadn't succeeded at anything that he was trying to do…but at the very least, he could protect Aoi and Tamaki. At that moment, he activated Flare, releasing a blinding light that should have caught any enemy off guard. Everyone in the hall covered their eyes, recoiling from the spell, and Ryuto began to run as fast as he could to Aoi and Tamaki. Just as he was about to pass Aegiana, however, he felt a chill run down his spine.

"Huh…?" He immediately stopped in his tracks. This was fortunate, because if he hadn't, his neck would have met Aegiana's outstretched blade. Fearfully, he looked to the side. She was standing there, staring right at him. "H-How…"

"I knew you'd try to blind me, so I shut my eyes before you could."

She'd read Ryuto like a book. It was as simple as that.

"Th-That can't…"

"Also, I'd like to clear something up," she said, lowering her blade as she closed her eyes.

Though Ryuto didn't understand what was happening, he knew that this was his chance. He tried to run again, but before he could even take two steps, Aegiana had struck him without even opening her eyes. She seized him by the neck and held him against the wall.

"Gah!"

"I could fight you with my eyes closed." She opened her eyes again. "Because of your naivete, you chose to use Flare at that moment. It was because you didn't intend to kill me. Area Heal." Between berating him, Aegiana cast an AOE spell to restore the vision of everyone who'd been blinded. She spoke again. "For what purpose do you act? For what reason do you *live*?!"

"Urgh…" Ryuto, unable to breathe properly, could only groan in response.

The yellow light around Ryuto vanished, signaling that Limit Breaker had ended. Aegiana let go of him and let him crumple to the floor, leaving him to scream in extreme pain from the aftereffects of using Limit Breaker.

"You pushed your body more than you should have. The feedback you're experiencing now will prevent you from moving freely. Well—this saves me the trouble of cutting off all your limbs." Aegiana proceeded to tie him up as well.

In the meantime, the slaughter of the nobles had concluded, leaving the party hall a bloody mess.

"Aegiana, take the heroes to their cells by yourself. After that, meet me in the training hall."

"Understood."

“Knight squad one, clean up the party hall. Squad two, slaughter the rest of the servants. Squad three, locate the second princess.” The chancellor smiled. “Bring her to me, dead or alive. After you’ve fulfilled your duties, reconvene in the training hall.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the knights shouted in unison.

One by one, they exited the party hall that was now filled with corpses, the stench of feces and urine, and a garden of blooming crimson.

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I beckoned to Ariya, then whispered in her ear. “There are three people around that corner. They’re walking right in the middle of the hall. Ten seconds until we make contact.”

“Okay.”

Pinpointing where they were, Ariya activated her Vacuum spell, which sucked the air out of a space, forming a vacuum. Soon enough, we heard the sound of three armored bodies falling to the ground.

“Clear.”

Human beings lose consciousness when their oxygen levels are low, and thanks to the fact that their heads were surrounded by a little pocket vacuum, they couldn’t even make a sound or call for help. As a precaution I ran up, took their swords, and stabbed them. It seemed wisest to be sure, since people could regain consciousness at the drop of a hat.

I’d always had a feeling this would be true, but I could now confirm that I had no reservations about killing humans. Most people would feel sick to their stomach, but not me. Ariya, on the other hand, had covered her mouth queasily after the first time we’d killed someone.

Our current strategy may have seemed invincible, but it was really only capable of surprise attacks. The knights, on the other hand, were wearing magical armor. From Ariya’s explanation, it seemed they were using tools called Magic Armor Auto. *Would that mean there’s a Manual version too?* Either way, it fortified the body as well as providing posture support, and came with an incantation that prevented magic from being cast. If, for example, Ariya cast an AOE spell like Vacuum right in front of them, this magic jammer would activate and stop the spell. In other words, we needed to catch them off guard.

“Let’s keep moving. Where’s the secret exit?”

“This way.”

At the moment, we were heading for the depths of the castle where there was supposedly an escape route. If we could get there, we’d be able to reach a safe place to hide. Nobody but the royal family knew of this passage, so there shouldn’t have been any knights...or at least that’s what Ariya said.

But I thought differently. The chancellor seemed like a pretty thorough guy. It was entirely possible that he’d also dealt with this supposed escape route. I kept this to myself, though, because if I let her take charge like this, it’d help me survive until the sun set.

With her combat strength, we could probably last for the hour and a half that remained before nightfall. If we ended up getting caught before I regained my powers, I planned to sell her out and save myself. I'd just tell them something like "I tried to surrender, but the second princess wanted my Detect ability, so she forced me to help her escape." With that, the second princess would look like a horrible person and be justly executed for making a regular person endure this kind of danger.

Honestly, I'd be surprised if we could hold out until the sun set. But at least I had nothing to lose, because even if we got caught, I could just surrender and sell her out to save myself. With this, I had a solid plan going forward.

I couldn't let Ariya lose hope, so I had to manipulate her so that she wouldn't succumb to despair. Fortunately, I'd gained her trust to the point that I could continuously rekindle that hope within her.

Suddenly, I caught a whiff of blood…the source of which we discovered soon enough.

"This… What happened here…?"

"This is the servants' quarters."

Oh—so all these bodies belong to the servants. This guy's so thorough…maybe even too *thorough.* Even if he was trying to quash any threat of a rebellion, there was no reason for him to act like a tyrant. That said, he had a strong enough will that he probably wouldn't care if he was called a tyrant later for his coup.

"There don't seem to be any knights around here…maybe because they finished killing everyone. Let's go."

"Yes, let's…" But before she could finish her sentence, her eyes landed on something.

Curious, I followed her gaze. When I saw what she saw, I realized why she'd stopped.

"Nala…" she said in a shaky voice.

In the back of the room lay the corpse of Nala, a single slash in the middle of her back and blood streaming from it.

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Holding the body of Nala in her arms, Ariya sobbed silently. There weren't many servants who supported the second princess. Plus, it had been apparent from our little outing that they were close.

"If I'd gotten here sooner…" She trailed off, but I knew that she wanted to say that she could have helped. She was most likely thinking that if she'd prioritized Nala's rescue rather than her own escape, this situation could've been prevented. But that wasn't how she should've been thinking about things.

"I doubt it. I bet that the chancellor gave the order to kill the servants right after he killed all the nobles. Of course, this would be the first place that they hit. No matter how fast we came, we wouldn't have made it."

I needed her to stay focused to protect me. If she broke here, she might slip up while casting spells and put us in even more danger.

"But…"

"There's nothing to reflect on or regret. There aren't any knights around, so you can take a moment to cry for now, but we need to get out of here before more show up."

I wouldn't have minded chilling here, but there was no place for us to hole up. If they had sent knights to kill the servants, they definitely had knights looking for Ariya too. It was only a matter of time until they came back.

I had to keep this a secret from Ariya, but with my vampirism, I did technically have a way to save people from death. However, I couldn't turn her into a vampire, nor did I want to. To do so, the target needed to be a virgin…and judging by the smell of Nala's spilled blood, she wasn't. It was rare for someone her age to be inexperienced, anyway.

Even if she was a virgin, though, I didn't want to make her a vampire. Turning humans into vampires was most likely fundamentally different from changing monsters into vampires. They'd have their own wills, unlike the thralls I controlled. I wouldn't be able to store them in my Shadow Storage either. They'd be able to move around on their own and do whatever they wanted.

At any rate, judging by the fact that they had killed all the servants in the party hall, I'd already had the feeling that Nala would be dead before we even got here. The only thing now was to wait to see what Ariya wanted to do with the body. If she wanted to say a few words, she'd need to do it quickly. If she wanted to leave her here, we'd leave her here. If she wanted to take her body with us, I'd have to object.

After crying for a bit, Ariya raised her head and separated herself from Nala's body. She straightened out Nala's clothes, laid her down, and crossed her arms on her chest.

"Will this be enough for you?"

"If I'm going to mourn her, then I need to mourn everyone here. I've made my decision." Ariya shut her eyes and fell silent.

The Rising Sun Kingdom didn't have a single national religion. Sure, they were devout followers of the witch, but in Ariya's case, for example, she was a believer in the path of the goddess, which was one of the biggest religions in the world, centered around the goddess of light. The way they prayed was different from other religions.

To a certain extent, I understood why people felt the need to pray like this…and yet I didn't. There were obvious benefits, like making you feel better, but I didn't understand the desire to *want* to pray. Whether you prayed or not had no effect on the fact that the corpse was gonna decay and become worm food. At the end of the day, they were still dead, and nothing would change that.

Ariya slowly opened her eyes. “I’m all right now. Let’s go. We haven’t much time,” she said.

“Okay. There aren’t any knights close by, so we can take it easy. Let’s just be cautious.”

We left the room, and Ariya led us down the hall. That room had been quite the brutal sight… Of course, the party hall was horrible too, though I’d only gotten a glimpse of it with Detect.

What I *could* tell was that magic tools were a lot more effective than I expected, Limit Breaker greatly multiplied your stats, and what the chancellor had said was gonna come back and bite him in the ass someday. My biggest takeaway was that the knight captain was incredibly strong.

I thought she had monstrous stats, but with the addition of magic tools, she was *crazy* strong. Strangely, though, her armor was nothing compared to what the knights were equipped with. Had it been specially made for her? I’d only seen a bit of what had happened because Detect only gave me snapshots of information, so I wasn’t able to Appraise it. I really wanted to look into the secret of her strength. Did it have anything to do with the fact that, after leaving with the heroes, the mana that had filled the party hall had dissipated?

As we walked, I considered various possibilities…and then felt someone pulling at my clothes.

Ariya was facing me with a confused expression. “You’re strong…Inori.”

There seemed to be a lot of emotions behind her words. I guess I hadn’t been as devastated by Nala’s death as I should have been. But still…

“The life of humans isn’t worth as much as you think,” I muttered under my breath.

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head.

She was better off not hearing what I’d said. After all, I didn’t want her losing any more trust in me. Fifty minutes left until sunset.

The sound of metal striking metal resounded across the stone dungeon as Aegiana closed the cell door. She gestured with her hands, manipulating something, and in the next moment, there was a dim glow and the sound of a lock clicking shut. The three heroes groaned from inside.

“This cell has special properties that seal magic. The walls and bars are fortified with adamantite, so they will not so much as budge without the use of a magic tool,” Aegiana explained to them.

The heroes had been brought to the dungeon that was used to confine the most dangerous criminals. There was no breaking out of the kingdom’s most fortified jail. Mana was required for its operation, but this condition was fulfilled by Aegiana’s daily visits.

“If this cell is as strong as you say it is, you could at least take our shackles off,” said Tamaki in a slightly shaky voice, holding her bound hands out.

“Sorry, but it’d be a problem for us if any of you resorted to suicide or tried to kill each other. I do plan to remove them when you’ve all calmed down.”

“Suicide? What if we bit our tongues off? How would shackles stop that?”

“That is a difficult method of suicide, not for those in their right minds. None of you have received training in such things. Besides, it’s not like you have any secrets to take to your graves.”

“It really sounds like you don’t want us to die. Why is that?”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t be telling you this…but you’re to be used as hostages for the Maccad Empire.” Aegiana was wearing a serious expression.

“Huh? Hostages?” Tamaki parroted in confusion.

Critical thinking wasn’t exactly in Tamaki’s wheelhouse, so as she racked her brain, Ryuto spoke up in a hoarse voice.

“The Maccad Empire is the Suzerain of the Federation Alliance. They don’t want the heroes dying. So, the kingdom’s gonna use us as hostages to prevent other countries from invading, and in the meantime, they’ll sort out their domestic affairs.”

“Precisely.” Aegiana nodded.

Ryuto was pretty much an empty shell right now, which made it all the more impressive to Aegiana that he was still able to explain their plan with ease.

“You claimed you shouldn’t have told us this much…but you wanted us to have a reason to cling to life. Getting the country’s affairs in order could take months, or even years. Given that you don’t know how long things will take, it would be too risky to keep us locked up anywhere else.”

Aegiana was silent.

With his head hanging, Ryuto continued to speak in a low voice. Despite his obvious fatigue, his deductions were so effortless it was almost unsettling. “You’d lose everything if we up and died from stress, so you’re talking with us to try to alleviate some of our anxiety. After all, if we died while you were still in the midst of getting your affairs in order, it’s entirely possible that the Maccad Empire would decide to launch an offensive.”

Once again, Aegiana said nothing.

“You made a point of demonstrating how your strength and intelligence exceed our own in order to scare us out of escaping. And you argued with me about my ideals in order to crush my will to rebel.”

“What happened, Ryuto?” asked Aegiana, looking down at him. “Did getting beaten that badly cool your head?”

Ryuto raised his haggard face, and the corners of his mouth curled into a faint smile. “That’s right… Things are becoming clearer. The blood running through my brain and my body is cold…but my gut’s burning with the desire to beat you.”

There was a part of Aegiana that wanted to react to Ryuto's taunt. As he looked up at her, his eyes burned bright with emotion. Instead, she exhaled, calming herself before formulating a scornful reply.

"You want to 'beat' me...not 'kill' me, huh?"

Ryuto fell silent. Aegiana stared at him with disgust.

“You’re still young. Devote your time to searching for what it is you want to protect, and for a reason to live. If you’ve something to protect and to live for, it will give you mental strength. Physical strength is not enough. If one wishes to survive, one must also have mental fortitude.”

“I can’t believe you’re telling me this with a straight face...”

“True... I’ve said too much to my enemy.”

The words she’d spoken had little to do with achieving her objectives. If anything, she’d only invigorated Ryuto’s will to rebel. All the same, she couldn’t help but see her past self in Ryuto.

The Elf Invasion Campaign twelve years ago was Aegiana’s maiden battle, at the young age of fifteen. She was the commander of a small platoon filled with warriors the same age as her, who had all trained together. Aegiana had doubts about the necessity of the invasion, but she shrugged them off, believing that it was all for the sake of the country.

The Rising Sun Kingdom sent a thousand soldiers to do battle against three hundred elves. The elves may have been strong in combat, but they were no match for the magic tools of their invaders...or at least, that’s what the Rising Sun Kingdom believed.

In the heat of battle, Aegiana had sent the helmet of an enemy warrior flying with her spear, revealing that the enemy’s forces were filled with young children. Though there may have been other reasons, her hesitation to kill them almost certainly contributed to the annihilation of her entire platoon.

The casualties suffered by the Rising Sun Kingdom didn’t end there. Approximately half of their forces were either slain or severely injured. Out of five battalions, two were annihilated, and one had its numbers cut in half. The supposedly proudly independent elves had received support from another country and were wielding magic tools.

The vanguard had been essentially destroyed, and the Rising Sun Kingdom’s forces were devastated. Despite that, a single girl standing alone, without any reinforcements, took out three platoons of enemies all by herself. Ironically, the very battle that had carved trauma deeply into Aegiana’s heart was the same that sparked her legend.

After that, she disappeared for a while, without a trace. Four years passed before she stood on a battlefield again. From then on, she was given the title of “Humanity’s Strongest.”

During that war, there was another individual who had stressed how unnecessary and dangerous the invasion was to the person in charge from the very start. However, his words fell on deaf ears. So this individual came to the front lines himself to protect his comrades, later retiring due to injury. A year after he had retired, he entered the civil service, and a mere

ten years after that, this former company commander, Bitrei, had risen to the rank of chancellor.

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"So the captain is 'Humanity's Mightiest,' and the chancellor is a former hero who rose to the top, huh?" I commented, having heard Ariya's explanation of the two of them as we walked down the hall. "That means it's only been a year since he became chancellor, right?"

"He may have been a hero previously, but as the chancellor, he's only gone out on inspection trips. He hasn't accomplished anything noteworthy."

When he went on these trips, he was probably meeting with various nobles to garner favor. It was quite possible that he had only become chancellor to start this coup d'état in the first place.

I also asked Ariya about the magic tools that the captain used. Her armor was apparently a prototype called Magic Armor Manual. The magic circles on it didn't activate automatically as they did in the other versions. Though this may have made it sound inferior, in Aegiana's hands, it was anything but. Because it was "manual," she was able to fortify any part of it the moment she wanted. It was precisely because she had such superb mana control, instincts, and decision-making skills that she could make this armor even more durable than the Auto version.

On top of that, she had two magic swords called Artifacts. They were ancient weapons with technology much more advanced than what even modern science could have hoped to produce—or so I'd learned from what I'd read.

One of the swords was made of pure mithril. This seemed strange to me, since I'd heard that pure mithril didn't exist in this world. Apparently, that rule didn't apply to Artifacts. But since it was pure mithril, it had the highest possible magic conductivity and could be used as both a sword and a magic staff.

The other sword was a katana that could cut through both magic *and* magic circles. It must've been the reason she had been able to cut through Ryuto's Light Sword over and over again. The fact that it could cut through magic circles was nuts, considering that physical attacks shouldn't have been able to affect magic circles.

I guess it only made sense that someone considered "Humanity's Strongest" would have both cheat-level strength *and* cheat-level equipment.

"But seriously—" I was about to voice a point of confusion when I sensed knights around the corner. They were still decently far away, but there was something off about their movements. Seeing me shut up, Ariya clammed up as well. "There are two people around the corner to the right, about fifteen paces away," I whispered.

"Okay."

We hid against the wall and gauged the timing. They were about five paces away from entering her strike zone, but for some reason, they stopped one step before it. It was as if they had realized something…

“Ariya, I think they know we’re here.”

“…!”

Well, it had only been a matter of time. My Stealth was only level 1 during the daytime, and while Ariya may have been someone who could easily blend into a crowd, it wasn’t a skill she could use outside of that context. As expected, the knights called out to us.

“Show yourselves! If you don’t, we will deem you our enemies.”

I sensed their mana. Most likely, they were booting up their magic armor, which meant that even if Ariya used her vacuum spell, it’d be negated. The worst part was that they were blocking our way to the secret exit. Nor could we just choose a different escape path…

“We have no choice but to fight. Can you do it?”

“I’ve no choice but to try.”

Though when I said “we,” I mostly meant “you,” because I was useless during the day, so there wasn’t much I could do against them. There were still thirty minutes left to nightfall. It was simultaneously a lot of time, and yet not very long at all.

“Here I go!”

As soon as Ariya spoke those words, she jumped out from around the corner and a smoke screen blew out.

“Wh-What?!”

“A smoke screen?!”

The knights panicked as they were engulfed by the smoke. Maybe it was because we were in a hallway, but the smoke spread fast and thick. I could barely see even a meter in front of me.

“Light Wave Vision.” A moment later, it was like I was seeing in infrared, but with more precision. I spotted Ariya running up to the two knights without any hesitation. *She shouldn’t be able to see through this smoke either… She’s got guts.* Suddenly, she jumped into the air and began to run across it. *What is this, a kind of double jump?* Vaguely, I remembered a spell called Air Step. She’d created magic circles under her feet that generated rising wind currents, which she used to propel herself into the air. The difficulty of this spell made it look less like magic she had cast and more like sheer acrobatics. She leapt over the two knights and landed behind them.

“Shock Bolt!” she cried out, aiming her magic circle at the backs of the two guards. They had both their shields and anti-magic barriers in front of them, which meant that their backs were practically defenseless. Furthermore, Shock Bolt was very effective against metal armor. The knights went rigid as the spell hit them, and then fell to the ground.

“Dispel Smoke.” Two words from her were enough to make the thick smoke disappear all at once. *Is smoke magic a combination between wind and earth magic?* From what I’d read, it was a very difficult spell. It’d probably taken years to master. From a technical standpoint, she seemed to be using magic that was more advanced than her stats allowed.

“Well done,” I said, walking up to her with a smile.

Ariya shot me a *look*.

Oh, I’m sorry, did you want the guy with the layman stats to fight? Nuh-uh. No way, Jose. Not happening.

“We don’t need to finish them off. The noise we made here is gonna attract more knights.”

“Okay. Let’s hurry. We’re close to the secret exit.”

We rushed forward, not worrying about the noise we were making. From what I could tell with Detect, we’d reach the secret exit without encountering anyone else. *But…can you guess what happens next?*

“Th-Then, we t-turn here,” said Ariya, through labored breaths.

“Got it.”

After we made it around the corner, all that was left was to reach the end of the corridor and open the secret door. Unfortunately, though, I had to stop her. There was something that would prevent our mission from being a success.

“Wait. *Wait*, Ariya!”

“Huh?”

Right as we reached the hidden door, I called out to Ariya. Death was waiting behind it.

“There’s an ambush…”

“Huh?!”

“I guess he knew about the secret exit… Or maybe he discovered it on his own? Either way, there are a lot of knights waiting behind that door.”

“No way… But then—” Her face had gone pale.

“We can’t escape this way,” I confirmed.

As soon as those words left my mouth, Ariya fell to her knees, her eyes filled with despair, and her mouth fell vacantly open. She was a lot more shocked than I thought she’d be. Maybe what had happened to Nala had affected her more than she’d let on.

There were still twenty-six minutes until sunset. We couldn’t give up yet, especially not with the knights still hot on our trail. There was no time to waste. I scooped her up and began running down the hall.

“Ariya, listen to me. It’s too early to give up.”

“Huh…?” Though she looked completely out of it, Ariya still turned to face me.

I nodded reassuringly. “I kept quiet about this before so as not to give you false hope, but apparently there are allied reinforcements on their way to the palace to help the royal family.”

“R-Really?”

Nope.

“Yeah. I overheard this earlier while using Detect. The reinforcements are planning on storming in once the sun sets, which means that as long as we can hold out until then, we’ll probably be saved.”

Running at full speed while carrying someone was tough. They were going to catch up at this rate...

"We're going to be saved... Really?"

"Yeah, trust me. There's still hope."

I'd really gotten good at telling blatant lies. Swindler hadn't even activated. I guess lying on the daily had made me a natural.

"I understand... Let me down. I can run by myself."

"Thanks. That was hard on me."

"Are you calling me heavy?"

"You're gonna say that this late in the game?"

Well, she was back to bantering and at least pretending to be okay. Either way, though, this helped our situation. I dropped Ariya to the ground. *Sorry for the rough landing—I was in the middle of running.* As soon as I let her down, I heard voices from behind us.

"There she is!"

"It's the second princess!"

"Black hair, eye patch, and servant's clothes... That must be the target we need to protect."

Shit! They caught up.

"Ariya, we gotta run."

"Right."

It seemed that Ariya hadn't heard them talking about me, which was fortunate because I didn't know how she'd react if she knew I wasn't on their "to-kill" list. Good to know that they were going to protect me, though. They couldn't have been talking about anyone else, anyway, since I didn't see anyone else with an eyepatch or black hair. *Shit, there are a ton of guards.* I really wanted to ask them if they weren't embarrassed by how many guards they were sending after one poor girl.

We kept running for another ten minutes, and now there were even more knights in pursuit. It was hard for me to run at full speed for this long during the daytime. I used Detect to check on our pursuers, only to find that there was another presence behind them. *Crap—we'll be surrounded at this rate.*

"Ariya, turn left at that corner."

"But that's—"

"Trust me!"

Ariya looked at me with confusion and desperation in her eyes but followed my orders.

"They're at a dead end!"

"Trap them!"

"Inori! This is—"

"It's fine."

Ariya was panicking, but I brushed off her concern. The hallway grew narrower and narrower, until finally it was about as wide as three people

standing abreast. Suddenly, there was nowhere else to run. We'd reached a dead end.

"We're trapped!"

"Nah, this is perfect."

If we'd kept running, they would've caught us in a pincer attack, or worse.

"There are too many of them. At least in a place like this, we can limit the number of people that are able to attack at once. If we can hold them off for another fifteen minutes, we win."

Ariya glared at me, her face pale.

Well...I knew I was asking for the impossible, but this was our best option. But since I couldn't fight, it was all up to her, so I completely understood why she was glaring at me. *Do your best as my shield, okay?*

◇

04:12
04:11
04:10
04:09

As I panted, the knight before me roared and swung his sword, which was strengthened by magic, down at me. I deflected it with a very dense and precise magic barrier. *How long have I been fighting now?* I had to have been nearing both my magical and physical limits.

I deflected another magic bullet, fired by a gun-wielding knight in the rear.

04:02

Deflecting magic swords and bullets, which were as strong as attacks from magic tools could get, should have been impossible with magic barriers. Or at least, it was normally. However, I compressed my magic barriers to be denser, thus strengthening their defensive power. It may not have allowed me to block attacks, but I could at least change their trajectory. This was a technique I'd worked on for over ten years in order to fight knights. I doubted there was anyone else capable of using it.

However, this spell required absolute concentration. Against just two knights, I wouldn't have much difficulty, but with all of them here, and over such a long period of time, I was afraid my mind would overheat and my willpower would be whittled away. But I had to survive. I needed to stay focused. Plus, Inori was behind me. He possessed a wonderful Divine Blessing, but it wasn't suited for battle.

03:38

Inori was currently huddled in a corner. A stray bullet had hit him in the leg, which was entirely my fault. Even if I was starting to lose consciousness, I had to protect him. It was hard to focus on making barriers and also think at the same time, but I had to. As he'd said, reinforcements were coming to save us at nightfall. As long as we held off until then, we'd be able to survive.

“Give up and die, Second Princess!”

“I refuse!”

An attack came down at me from my left, and I diverted it to the right. Immediately, another attack came from the front, and I pushed this one past me. Then a thrust from the left, which I deflected to the right before promptly diverting a bullet into the ground. I wasn’t even given time to breathe before a shield was thrust into my face, and I sent it the same way as the bullet. All of a sudden, a sword swung up towards me. I quickly evaded it, and all its blade cut was air.

03:15

At first, I was able to find opportunities to launch counterattacks, but now I had to focus on myself and ensure I left no openings of my own. I didn’t know how long I’d been fighting for, but I was certain I only needed to hold out for a little longer. If I could, surely everything would work out...

“Move! The magic circle’s complete!”

“Roger!”

They’re going to fire a magic attack at me. I need to deflect it—but wait... If I do that, it might hit Inori. I’ll need to take it head-on, with the strongest barrier I can make. I don’t have much mana left, but I think I can make it work.

“Fire Lance!”

My clothes caught fire, but I was able to block the attack. Yet there was no reprieve; a slash followed in its wake. I need to deflect this, but I don’t have much mana left. I’ll just have to create a smaller barrier and position it very precisely to deflect the blow...

02:46

It’s so hot! I’m on fire! It’s hot! It burns! I’m in pain! Someone save me!

Nobody’s coming to save you. Are you stupid? The king, queen, your little sister, Nala—they’re all dead. Nobody’s coming. That guy’s not gonna save you either. He’s just gonna keep cowering in that corner.

Inori used Detect to help me escape. I can’t ask him to fight or to save me.

But look at how hard you’re trying. He’s not even going to try to help? He’s abandoning you.

What can he do...? It’s my turn to save him.

“Your turn”? Has he ever helped anyone out of the goodness of his heart? You really don’t know him, do you? He has a black heart. He’s just using you.

“Shit. Give up already!”

“No!”

Our interests are aligned. He wants to survive with me, so he came up with the best plan—

Is this really the best plan? There had to have been something better. Maybe this was just the best plan for him.

Even so...I’m only alive because of him. I must trust him.

You're not trusting him. You're clinging to him. If you didn't have him to cling to, you'd have shattered by now. You should know that he's not to be trusted.

...You're wrong.

02:09

Think about it. If reinforcements are coming, then why are there so many knights here?

They're panicking and trying to kill me off quickly.

What is so important about you that they'd prioritize killing you over preparing to fight the reinforcements?

But...

In the first place, who would be sending these so-called reinforcements? Are there any nobles you know who'd send out forces? Most of the nobles who were supportive of the royal family are dead. The rest are probably in the chancellor's pocket.

Then...it has to be the Maccad Empire.

There's no way they'd get here by sunset. More generally, what army would wait until sunset to launch an attack? Plus, it's weird that all the knights would know about it.

01:52

Do you get it now? He lied about the reinforcements.

No, he didn't! They're coming. If they don't...

You don't want to think about it, do you? But he's deceiving you. I don't know why, but it's probably to manipulate you.

No. He's helping me.

This has been his plan all along. He used you for his plans. You're used to this by now, so you should be able to tell. He looks at you like everyone else who's ever used you. Like every other dirty noble out there.

No. That wasn't the feeling I got from him. You're wrong.

You can stick your head in the ground all you want, but it won't change the truth.

01:23

Reinforcements aren't coming.

They are.

There's no way they are.

"They're coming... Come..."

I deflected a slash, then sent a bullet to the right. Oh no, I'm falling... I need to defend my left side, but my head... I feel sick. I need to protect myself. Protect myself? Why? Because I want to live. I don't want to die. It hurts!

01:01

Just think about it. Why are they still so calm if reinforcements are practically knocking on the gates? Why is it so quiet outside?

Shut up.

Wouldn’t there be more of a fuss if there were people outside? They’d at least try to light the area, don’t you think?

Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

They should be here by now, but I don’t think there’s any sign of them.

“Shut up! Shut up! Come! Come!”

“What are you saying, Second Princess?”

“She’s lost it. Kill her already.”

00:45

Nobody’s coming. There are no reinforcements. He made it all up. He’s deceiving you. You’re just a clown—no, a puppet.

Come! Come! Come!

Since you were born, you’ve been bound by rules, unable to defy anyone. You’ve lived a life where nothing was given to you…and now you’re going to die, dancing in his palm. A fitting, pitiful end for the Puppet Princess.

Quiet! Quiet! Quiet!

You still want to live? Give up. You’re not free, and you never will be.

Quiet! Quiet! Quiet!

00:31

They’re coming! He said they would! Can’t you hear them?!

“Come! Come! Come! Come!”

00:26

Hear who? What are you even saying?

The reinforcements are here! I just need to hold out a little more and we’ll win!

Face reality. There are no reinforcements.

Just a few seconds more and they’ll come. We’ll be saved. They’ll save us.

00:21

See?! Can’t you hear the fuss of an army approaching?! They’re here!

You’re just hearing things.

Shut up! They’re coming! Please come! Please, I beg you! If you don’t—

00:18

In just a little bit, we’ll hear them coming.

There’s nothing to hear! Stop talking out of your ass!

I can hear them… Come… Pl… Ple…

“Nobody’s coming, Inori!!!”

00:15

“Finally, an opening! Die!”

I dodged a slash from the right, but...

Oh, look—you’ve been cut.

“Gah…! H-Huh?” The world was spinning. My body felt heavy.

What’s happening? Did I fall? Is this stone? Am I on the floor? I fell? Why? My stomach feels cold… I’m starting to see things. I’m not sure if this is pink, orange, or red… But there’s something glossy and wet… Are these entrails? But whose?

“A-Ahh...!”

00:11

It hurts... It hurts? It hurts! It hurts! It hurts! My stomach hurts! A red liquid is flowing out of me. Is this blood? Whose? Mine? My stomach was cut? Death...? Am I going to die? I don’t want to die.

“Heal...ing Magic...”

I needed to heal myself, quickly. The cut went deep. I couldn’t heal it. I couldn’t focus. Stop hurting! It hurts! My stomach feels so cold... Is this blood? Are these tears? Am I crying?

What are you using healing magic for, anyway? You’re better off giving up. You’re beyond saving.

No. I don’t want to die. I want to live!

Live? For what? What have you accomplished in life? You don’t even have any lingering attachments. You have nothing.

I know, but still, I don’t want to die. I want to live. I don’t care. I want to live!

Why? Your friends and family are all dead. You’re the only one left.

“How pitiful... The least I can do is end your suffering, Second Princess.”

00:07

I want to live, so I can be free.

Isn’t that kind of contradictory?

Those are my true thoughts. I don’t care if they’re contradictory.

True... That is your nature—the true nature of my big sister. You want to live in order to be free. You have a twisted soul. You’re self-centered and selfish, but prideful. You should live to your fullest, no matter how painful it is.

You should be grateful you get to live.

“Healing...magic...”

“Farewell, Second Princess.”

00:04

00:03

00:02

00:01

00:00

“The sun’s set.”

Through the haze that filled my thoughts, I heard his voice.

“It’s my turn now.”

Chapter 4

Inori Takafuji / Demon (Vampire – Baron-Class) / Lv. 13
HP: 2350/2817(+0+105) / MP: 20108/20110(+0+40)
STR: 3280(+0+112) / VIT: 2922(+0+95) / DEX: 2561(+0+48) /
AGI: 3412(+0+110) / INT: 5084(+0+74)
Unique Skills: [Growth Boost] [5x Exp Multiplier] [½ Required Exp] [Eye of True Sight] [Eye of Sigils] [Contempt for the Sun God] [Vampirism]
[Baron-Class Authority] [Skill Pilfer] [True Dark Magic] [Armament Craft] [Detect] [Level Up] [Skill Acquisition] [Monarch Caliber]
General Skills: [Swordsmanship Lv. 6] [Stealth Lv. 6] [Throwing Arts Lv. 8] [Dagger Arts Lv. 5] [Dropkick Lv. 10] [Swindler Lv. 3] [Trap Removal Lv. 3] [Flight Lv. 4] [Trapper Lv. 4] [Bite Lv. 10] [Leap Lv. 10] [Evasion Lv. 2] [Poise Lv. 6] [String Arts Lv. 6]
Titles: Indomitable Soul, Involved Against Will, Ham Actor, Giant Killer, Scum of the Earth

"Scum of the Earth"? That's kinda rude. More importantly, thanks to the rise in my stats, the small amount of damage I'd taken during the day had also increased proportionally and was now ten times larger than it had been. That really sucked. The fact that I was still damaged also made it clear that I didn't regenerate during the daytime.

I looked down before me, where Ariya was lying in a pool of her own blood.

"You were a fantastic shield."

She'd taken a deep cut to her abdomen. There was no way she'd survive, but whatever. It'd be too hard to run away with her, anyway. I'd planned to kill her at the end of everything, so this saved me the trouble.

"What are you…" The knight who'd slashed Ariya glared at me. "You're a special target. We have orders to keep you alive. Surrender now."

Hm… There are quite a few knights here. What a pain in the ass! Fortunately, all of them were gathered in this narrow corridor. It made me want to mow 'em down with a machine gun. *Damn, wish I had one. Oh, wait —I do.*

"Fenrir."

Upon calling the name of my thrall, my shadow grew in size, and from it emerged a massive black wolf.

"What is iiit, my masterrr?"

"Wh-What is *that*?!"

"A wolf?! Monster!"

"Where'd it come from?!"

Oh, shut up! As I'd expected, making Fenrir my thrall had turned his fur black, and though he had scars across his eyes, they'd since healed. If anything, they made him look even cooler.

"Hm. You're smaller than I thought you'd be."

"This space is smaaall. I've reduced my size to maaatch."

Oh, wow, you can do that? As an aside, it didn't look like he could turn into a human. Way to stick to the script. But then again, judging by his voice, he'd probably turn into an old dude or something, so maybe it was for the best.

"Use your long-range attack on these knights."

"May I kill every last one of themmm?"

"Yeah—kill 'em all."

"Understooood."

Witness my biological machine gun, Fenrir. It sure was convenient that he could move around on his own. Plus, now that he was my thrall, he had regeneration, which meant that he had an endless supply of fur. *Damn, he's overpowered.*

In this narrow corridor, there was absolutely no way to avoid his attack. I'd thought that maybe their armor would provide some kind of defense against his projectiles, but it turned out that wasn't really the case.

"Wh-What *is* this?!"

"Aghhh!"

"Gahhh!"

"Capta—"

"No! Guh!"

Fenrir's attack pierced through armor, shields, and flesh alike, splattering them all over the place.

"Rooooar!"

"Whoa, that's cool."

Though less than a minute had passed, the hallway was nothing but a lake of blood.

"Okay, go back into my shadow. I might call you again later."

"Understooood," said Fenrir, before returning to my shadow.

In hindsight, though, since he could change his size at will, maybe I should've kept him out. I glanced at Ariya, who was still lying there in a pool of her own blood. *Mmm... Looks tasty.* Her scent was that of a virgin, and rich with mana. She would've been quite an exquisite feast. *Maybe I should just dig in. All I need to do is be careful not to turn her into a vampire.*

I approached her, but as I did so, I was amazed to find that she was still alive, mumbling something to herself.

"Wait... You're not dead?"

"Ugh..."

I took a look at her stats, and saw that both her HP and MP were very low. Despite that, she was still using magic. *Is she healing herself?* But more than likely, it wasn't possible for her to out-heal the lethal amount of

damage she'd taken. She didn't have enough MP to keep this up either. At this rate, she'd die.

Ariya opened her eyes and glared at me. Given the fact that I'd deceived her, it made sense that she'd do so. I didn't really know how she felt about me right now, but I doubted it was anything nice. Still, in those eyes of hers, I saw the will to live. She wanted to live so badly that she didn't care how pitiful it made her look.

Her family had been killed, her home had been destroyed, her closest friend had been slain, and she'd been betrayed by me, the person she thought was her ally. She had nothing left. Even so, she wanted to live. *Wow, she's strong. How many times is she gonna pique my interest?* I felt my lips curling into a smile.

"Hey, Ariya. You in there?"

She nodded slightly, confusion on her face.

"I've got a few questions for you. First—do you wanna die, or do you wanna continue clinging to life? You've lost your family, your home, your friend—you really have nothing left. Even so…you still wanna live?"

Ariya closed her eyes. Honestly, I don't really wanna do this…but I'm not about to lose this source of entertainment. Guess my hands are tied.

"Okay, here's the thing: I can keep you alive. But in order to do that, there are several conditions. First—" I looked her straight in the eyes. "Are you a virgin?"

"…Huh?" Though she looked extremely bewildered, she nodded.

"Next: if we go through with this, you'll have to throw away all your pride as a human and serve me. Put simply, you will be my slave. You won't be allowed to live as a human. Naturally, this means that you might not be able to resolve any lingering regrets you have. If I save you, your body will be rejuvenated, and you'll stay young semipermanently." When I finished, I saw that she was once again glaring at me. It was possible she thought I wanted to make her my sex slave. "And I don't care how you interpret what I said."

I had no intention of using her in that way, but just in case, I decided to put that out there. It allowed me to test her resolve when faced with the worst possible scenario.

"Why…save…?" Ariya asked in a raspy voice.

Her question wasn't a complete sentence, but it was easy enough to guess what she meant.

"No reason. Just seems like it'd be interesting." Then I exhaled, and my tone turned serious. "You're running out of time. Make a decision. What's it gonna be?"

Live, or die? Living means uncertainty…but also survival.

"Live… No matter… Don't care…" she pleaded.

"Heh… You've lost your family…damn near everything you had…but even in the face of all this tragedy, you choose to cling to life. You've got heart."

“Of…course…I want to live. Even if it means…selling my soul to the devil.”

“Would that make me the devil in this scenario? That hurts. But yeah, I guess I’m definitely closer to the devil than to being an angel or God.” I sighed, supporting her torso. “Let’s get this over with then, shall we? From now on, you serve me,” I said, and sank my fangs into the nape of her neck.

“Now, then…” I summoned around ten black wolves from my shadow.

“Your orders, master?”

“I want three of you to guard this girl.”

“Without fail.”

“As you will.”

“Easily done.”

You guys say some interesting things. At any rate, I’d successfully turned Ariya into a vampire. The next time she opened her eyes, that’s what she would be. I really hoped that she wouldn’t be rebellious or anything, though. The problem was that I now had to bring this princess along for the ride, but thanks to all the people who’d served the chancellor trying to kill her, she had a big target painted on her back. Simply put, having her around in these circumstances was a huge pain in the ass.

That being said, I had a plan. It wasn’t the best, but as long as I caught the knights off guard, I could take them out. *Yeah, think that’s what I’ll do.*

“The rest of you—suck the blood from those corpses and turn them into ghouls.”

One thing I had discovered from this experience was that the blood my thralls drank also fueled me. *How very convenient.* For the time being, I dispatched the seven wolves and then moved out as well.

“All right—it’s killing time.”

◇

I was running across the roof of the castle. I’d changed out of my servant’s clothes and into my Black Blood Shirt. I’d also taken off my eyepatch.

Other countries didn’t know what Ariya looked like, which meant that I needed to kill anyone in this castle who knew that she was alive, that she was with me, or even anyone who might be able to guess any of this information. It was a pain in the ass, but it *would* serve as a good chance to level up and acquire new Skills.

“Oh. Here’s good.”

I hid in the shadow cast from moonlight falling across a small spire, then began moving along the wall. I reached a window and then put my hand on it.

“Just as I thought. It’s sealed shut.” I peeked inside, using my left eye to look around. “Heh. Might as well have some fun.”

◇

“Your Majesty, we received a report that we’ve cornered the second princess.”

“Kill her.”

“Yes, sir.”

At my curt order, the soldier quickly left the party hall. Aside from the second princess and that one boy, I’d completely taken over the castle and lorded over its inhabitants. The coup d’état was nearly complete.

I’d finally come this far. No matter how much I criticized the futility of the wars our country waged, it fell on deaf ears. I knew full well that I was not able to stop the violence. The best that I could do was protect my own men. That was why I had sworn to myself then that I would save everyone from their needless deaths, and rid this country of its rot, all in accordance with the witch’s will.

After a year of education, I had entered the civil service. Even there, I had felt the effects of corrupt leadership. The root cause of the rot wasn’t certain individuals, but the system itself. It was far from perfect. It was out of alignment with the witch’s will, not so much a beacon to the rest of the world as it was a putrid odor to be avoided. In order to return our country to its former glory, there needed to be an overhaul of the system…as well as of those in charge.

I’d planned this coup before I had even become chancellor. I knew that Aegiana had been harmed by the Elf Invasion Campaign, so I’d enlisted her help with my plan. She was one who would lay down her life for her country if need be, but I was able to convince her to stand with me. There were many who served under her who felt the same way as I did, and pledged their swords to me as well. Thanks to that, I had control of the knights.

I witnessed hell itself when I became chancellor and went on my inspection trips around the country. I saw people crushed by taxes, a lack of public order, rampant disease, expanding slums, and increasing inflation despite a decrease in quality of life. Towns were bereft of any livelihood. The things I saw made even the situation in the capital seem preferable.

These disasters were burned into my mind. I knew that I had to reform this country quickly, even if it meant being called a tyrant by future generations, and no matter how many people I had to kill.

The summoning of the heroes was good timing. In essence, the queen had decided to summon the heroes on her own. It wasn’t too hard to use that as a pretext for change. Now, I had finally rid this country of her poison and was but one step away from true reformation.

The process would still take time since there was a need to fix our domestic affairs, restructure the military, change our policies, and build a new country from the ground up. I had a lot on my plate to worry about. *I mustn’t be hasty, though. Don’t lose your spine now, Bitrei. This is a critical time—you must stay vigilant and strong.* Just as I had that thought, I heard a male voice from behind me.

“Bitrei. Look how far you’ve come.”

“I’ve only just begun. I mustn’t let my guard down,” I said, without turning around. “Who are you?”

There should have been guards on either side of me...and whoever this is, they should have addressed me more formally. So who is this person? However, I wasn’t afforded the time to turn around and look, nor was I physically able to. One would have needed a neck to do that.

My head tumbled to the ground, and a vision of blood spewing from my headless body filled my eyes. Then I saw him. A boy in a black shirt—a very unfamiliar outfit—stood there. That was as much as I was able to comprehend before my consciousness clouded over, fading away completely.

◇

“L-Lord B-Bitrei?!”

The knights cried out in horror at the scene of the chancellor’s head rolling across the ground, blood pouring from his headless body, with a young man behind him, dressed in black and holding a black sword.

“Welp—coup squashed,” declared the black-clad boy—who had most likely slain Bitrei, the leader of the revolution—in a cold voice. With this, there was nobody left with royal blood to lead the knights. A sudden panic washed over the knights as the reality of the situation hit them, filling them with despair and confusion.

The black-clad boy turned to the knights and continued. “Your plan’s in ruins. There’s no reason for any of you to fight.” He stashed his blood-soaked blade. “Honestly, though, you can’t think that we’re done here, right?” The boy’s cold voice echoed across the quiet party hall. “You’re the ones who declared that anyone can die, at any moment. Logically, that would mean you’re all ready to die meaningless deaths like the bugs you are.” And he didn’t stop there. “So, here’s the thing. I’m going to have to kill all of you for very personal reasons.” He raised both his arms out to the sides, and a total of eight lustrous black knives appeared in his hands. Then, in the next moment, a faint smile appeared on his lips. “I’d be ever so glad if you guys struggled before your inevitable deaths.”

There was neither scorn nor satisfaction in his smile. His expression filled the knights with fear like they’d never felt before. The boy crossed his arms, preparing to throw the knives. Then there was a sound of rustling fabric as he flung his arms outwards, throwing the eight knives with terrifying speed.

“Gah!”

“Agh!”

“Geh!”

“Ah!”

Eight screams followed as the throats of the knights were pierced by the knives, then came the sound of armored bodies falling to the ground. Even after witnessing this, however, the knights still couldn’t seem to process the situation.

“I’m not done yet.” The black-clad boy, Inori Takafuji, drew eight more knives from the shadow of his sleeve. Upon throwing them, he used Puppet Master—a dark magic Skill—to guide the knives straight through the gaps in the knights’ armor, piercing them in the throats once more.

Only the surfaces of their shields could nullify magic, and all their armor did for them was provide added protection against blows. In short, if you could just get past their armor, you’d be able to inflict fatal injuries on them.

Another eight knights fell to the ground at the boy’s merciless hands. Even at this stage, though, the knights were wrought with confusion. Inori, for his part, merely seemed disappointed. He retrieved the knives he’d thrown with Puppet Master and prepared them to be thrown again. Just as he was getting ready to repeat these killings, a veteran knight with a differently shaped shield called out from the middle of the party hall.

“Don’t let something like this mess you up! Get in formation!” His voice boomed out across the room.

This man was the commander of this squad. He had many years of experience under his belt, allowing him to keep his calm and his reasoning abilities even in this chaotic situation. He raised his shield and glared at Inori.

“Use your shields to defend yourselves. They’re nothing but throwing knives!”

“Nothing but throwing knives, are they?” Inori asked mockingly.

One of the many knives flying around the room was headed for a younger knight.

“Hmph.” This knight was comparatively calm and collected. He read the trajectory of the knife and raised his shield, meaning to use its magic barrier to defend himself. But to his surprise, just before the Dark Iron Dagger connected with the shield, it suddenly swerved, completely ignoring the laws of physics. It made a sharp turn around the shield, then went straight for his throat.

“Wha—gah!”

The knife sliced open the knight’s carotid artery, extinguishing the light in his eyes. The same went for the other knights who had raised their shields. As though toying with their targets, the knives suddenly changed trajectories before closing in to finish them off.

Thanks to Inori’s Eye of True Sight, he had no blind spots. He could track the knights’ every last movement, no matter how slight. Combined with Puppet Master, he could control the trajectory and speed of the knives perfectly, over and over again.

“There’s no blocking *these* knives.”

Not even something as fast as Fenrir could dodge these knives. Attacking the sluggish knights, weighed down by all their armor, was child’s play for Inori.

He threw the knives once more, retrieved them once they had pierced their targets, threw them again, then added even more knives to the mix.

The knives never flew in a straight line but danced through the air in every direction imaginable. The knights had no chance to defend themselves. What had once been a huge number of knights in the party hall was reduced to quite a small number at a frightening pace.

At this point, there were over forty knives flying around the room, all with different trajectories. The room was filled with the screams of the knights and the smell of human waste as the walls were sprayed with fresh blood. It was as if the massacre that had occurred but two short hours ago was being replicated.

"Dammit! Rally to me! *Now*!!!" The remaining knights, numbering maybe just a dozen or so, quickly gathered around the commander at his order despite their confusion. "Activate Artifact!" The commander's shield deployed a dome-like barrier with a rainbow luster around his men.

Inori flung his knives at full force, but they merely bounced off of the barrier. "An Artifact...? So people other than the captain have them?" Inori pondered aloud before Appraising it.

```
Aegis of the Guardian Deity (Creator: Unknown)
Quality: SS / Value: 6000000 Dells
An Artifact. A discovery from an ancient civilization that was
forged with lost technology. Erects a semispherical strategic
defensive barrier which varies in size depending on the amount
of magic it is infused with. The user is unable to move while
the barrier is in use.
```

Inori was slightly perplexed by the description—and was particularly hung up on what exactly a "semispherical strategic defensive barrier" was supposed to be—but at the very least, he got the gist of what the Artifact was capable of.

He recovered the knives that had been deflected and had them hover right outside of the barrier. Though they recoiled in fear, the knights also could not help but stare in astonishment. Their commander, his face still stern, spoke up.

"This barrier cannot be penetrated from the outside by magical or physical attacks. However, our attacks may pass through unimpeded. We will recuperate here, then defeat him with magic," he declared to the other knights.

Oh, so that's where the 'strategic' part comes from, Inori thought.

Leering at Inori, the commander continued to supply the aegis with magic. Upon closer inspection, he began to wonder if Inori had been the one that Aegiana had her eye on. He hadn't heard anything about the boy possessing these kinds of powers, though.

Now that they had a chance to catch their breath, a few of the knights also recognized him as the supposed “harmless” target that they were supposed to protect. Of course, this brought up the question of why he was attacking the knights. But there was no point in trying to figure that out now. They were way past that.

Now, the knights who could use magic had moved forward and were beginning to form their magic circles. Despite this, Inori Takafuji approached them nonchalantly. There wasn’t even a shred of fear in his step as he walked closer.

What is he doing? the commander wondered.

Any sane person would have tried to put as much distance between themselves and the barrier as possible in order to escape the attack, but not Inori. Instead, he was moving closer to it. The commander was utterly confused. He looked straight into Inori’s eyes. The person walking towards him was unlike any kind of person he’d ever seen before. It was like a mysterious apparition, wearing an expression of absolute indifference.

In the next moment, a golden magic circle formed in Inori’s left eye—the yellow one—and then the commander saw a flash of light. All of a sudden, the same golden magic circle had formed in his eyes, spelling the end of his normal state of mind.

“Deactivate…” said the commander in a low voice.

As soon as he did, the rainbow dome disappeared as if melting into thin air, leaving all those who were inside completely unprotected.

“C-Commander, wh-why are you—”

But as they turned to look at his face, they saw not a shadow left of the commander they had once known. All that remained was an invalid with vacant eyes and drool dripping from his lips.

“Commander?!”

There was no trace of the man he used to be left.

“No…”

“Aghh!”

As soon as the barrier disappeared, the knives that had been pointed at them flew in, and once again the room was filled with the screams of the knights.

“The stronger a target’s mental fortitude, the less effective hypnosis probably is. So the fact that you were so easily hypnotized means that…” Inori muttered, trailing off with a bored look on his face.

However, the hypnosis he wielded was a very high-level spell. There weren’t many who could resist it with their will alone. Even so, the knights who were casting their spells couldn’t accept that the commander had been enthralled. The barrier that the Artifact erected should have defended against all magic, including hypnosis.

But they did not understand what had happened at a fundamental level, because they did not know that the magic Inori used had come from a completely different world. The aegis could recognize magic from this world

and defend against it, but when faced with spells from a different world, it had no way of stopping them—particularly when they were a different type of magic entirely. Any of this world's defensive options against magic were rendered useless in the face of Inori—a walking contradiction that ignored the laws governing this world.

Once the barrier had disappeared, it was over. The knives struck all at once, and were able to slaughter all the knights, save for two. The two survivors began running at full speed for the exit.

"Shit! Shit! Who *is* this guy?! He was supposed to be harmless! What part of him is harmless?!" one of the knights scowled as he ran to the door. He kicked it down and made a sharp left into the hallway, but his fate was already sealed. "What is this?!" he yelled, as he realized that his body was caught on something—or to be more precise, restrained. "I-Is this string?!"

Several slender black strings bound the knight's body. Upon closer inspection, the knives that had landed in the walls had set up a web of strings during the battle itself.

"You're not getting away," the black-clad boy's voice echoed from behind him.

The strings slithered around the bodies of the two knights, tightening threateningly.

"Strings really are so useful," Inori muttered, as he walked in front of them.

"P-Please don't kill me! Don't—" one of the knights pleaded desperately.

"Yeah, no. I don't have time for this." The boy responded without a single shred of emotion. He raised both his hands, curling fingers around the throats of the knights, and *squeezed*.

"D-Demon—guh..."

"Agghhh..."

Inori could feel them trying to gasp for air as he crushed their throats in his hands. Their screams echoed across the halls, but even as spittle flew from their mouths, he paid them little heed.

"Ew, spit? Nasty..."

"Alec...?"

A woman's voice rang out across the dark hallway as Inori stood there, holding the two men up by their necks.

"Elfaye...right?" Inori responded. Internally, he was wondering just who or what an Alec was, but it seemed reasonable to assume that it was the name of one of the knights he'd just killed.

Inori had used Detect to discern her identity. She was one of the warriors in Aegiana's War Maiden Battalion, and she wasn't the only one of them here. All together there were four of them standing there looking at Inori.

"That voice... You're Inori, aren't you?" said Maria, the vice captain, in tones of disbelief.

Inori remembered her as the person who was usually by Aegiana's side, who brought them refreshments during training.

"Yep, it's me."

"We were instructed to stop any invaders from entering the party hall, and to bring you to the captain if we saw you. After we escort you to her, we will need to know what exactly you're doing with those two."

"Nah, no need. I'll tell you right now: I killed them," Inori said casually, giving the now lifeless bodies of the two knights a little shake.

Maria gasped. It was difficult to reconcile her image of the person she had known when he was in training, and the person standing in front of her now. "And why, exactly, did you do that?"

"Well, I decided to kill everyone, so I couldn't really leave any of them alive, now could I?"

Maria couldn't comprehend the situation. Nothing made sense. Even if he had somehow killed these two knights, how was it possible that he had also killed all of the knights in the party hall? But she couldn't hear any sounds from inside. Plus, Inori himself was standing there with a ghastly smile plastered across his face. He had to have been telling the truth.

"I'm your enemy. This is perfect timing! I wanted to try my hand at melee combat too. Come on—try to kill me! If you don't, I'll kill you all first. Either way, you're all gonna die."

She sensed instinctively how dangerous he was. A chill ran up her spine. All the same, her mind rejected what her senses were telling her. Rationally, it was hard to fully accept what had happened.

"There's no way you could've killed all the knights in the party hall—"

"Uh... Okay, wait. Hold on," said Inori, opening one of his hands and then holding it up to Maria. Still holding Alec's neck, he relaxed his other arm. "Do you really need more proof? Look. You and me? We're enemies. You should have more than enough information to understand that. Get with the program."

Inori began to twist Alec's head. His cervical vertebrae had already been crushed, but now it began to shatter. The warriors gasped in horror and took a step back. Inori brought Alec's body forward and then began jerking the now flaccid mouth around, as if it were part of a puppet.

"'Save meeee!' Just kidding," he joked.

"Rahhhh!!!" A furious roar exploded from Elfaye's throat as she activated her magic armor.

"Finally!" Inori sneered with satisfaction, tossing Alec's corpse to one side. "This is what I wanted!"

"I'll kill you!" She kicked off the ground and sprinted towards him, immediately closing the distance between them. With a thrust of her sword, she pierced Inori's abdomen. His guts spilled out, and he coughed up blood.

Through ragged breaths, Elfaye began to try to pull her sword out of Inori's torso.

“But y’know…I might have liked it if you were a *little* more levelheaded about all this. Did you like this guy or somethin’? My bad, I guess,” Inori went on, as if nothing had happened.

“Wha... You’re still alive?! Wait, I can’t pull my sword out!”

No matter how much force she used, the sword stayed firmly stuck in Inori. She looked again at the wound she’d dealt and saw the blood that had spilled out begin to coil around her blade as if it had a mind of its own.

“You can’t pull out the blade because of abdominal pressure. That should be like swordsmanship 101.” Inori took out a knife and stabbed her in the throat. After piercing her carotid artery, he pulled it out, and blood gushed out. Elfaye’s lifeless body fell to the floor. At that point, her sword fell out of Inori’s abdomen, and the wound closed up behind it. “Now, then…”

“Miranda! Alice! In formation! The one standing before us is not Inori. Do not falter!”

Internally, Inori retorted that he was in fact the same Inori they were familiar with, but decided not to say this aloud because he’d finally gotten them riled up and didn’t want to spoil that.

Miranda and Alice fell back, readying their staffs. Their usual party formation had Maria and Elfaye as the vanguards, and Miranda and Alice as the back line. Without Elfaye, it would be hard for them to fight up close, which meant that their best strategy now was to have Maria defend the back line, while the two of them became the main source of damage.

“I’ll create an opening. When I do, attack immediately!”

Maria rushed in and swung her sword without hesitation. Since thrusts didn’t seem to be very effective, she’d decided to use slashes instead, but Inori jumped in order to avoid the blow.

Bad move, Maria thought. In the air, he had nowhere to go until he landed. He would probably hit the ground before Miranda and Alice got their spells off, but as he was now, he wouldn’t be able to avoid an attack from Maria. She pressed in closer, but as she did, his trajectory suddenly changed. It was like he was flying or being pulled by something, and very rapidly at that. He flew past Maria, closing in on Miranda and Alice.

As much as Maria wanted to react to this, something stopped her movements in their tracks. All she could do was turn her head, watching Miranda and Alice fall to the ground as soon as he landed.

“Wh-What did you do?!” she yelled, glaring at him.

“Hm… Something like a sideways bungee jump, maybe?”

As soon as Inori’s midair trajectory had changed, Miranda and Alice had seemed to become tangled in something, binding them tightly.

“String…?”

“Yep.” Inori moved his arm, stringing up Miranda and Alice, and cut their exposed throats. Their bodies went limp, and he let them fall back to the ground.

Half in a daze, Maria stared at him.

“Okay then, Vice Captain. It’s finally one-on-one. I’m gonna use you as a warm-up before I take on the captain.”

“Captain Aegiana…?” Maria bit her lip, her body shaking. “I will kill you where you stand.”

“Hm. Not bad.” Inori brought out his Black Wood Sword, readying himself.

“Hyaaah!” Maria screamed as she brought her blade down on Inori.

“Tsk.” Inori blocked the attack with his sword, but could feel himself being pushed back.

Maria kept up the pressure, getting even closer. This time, Inori had to bend his body to just barely dodge her swing.

“Fake step!” Maria took another step forward—but she didn’t move the foot that was in front, instead moving her back foot. Then she moved her front foot forward, allowing her to take a larger step than usual. It was a feint that allowed her to easily aim her slashes at his defenseless neck.

“Whoa…”

“Even if you can deal with the first slash—” she began to say…but there wasn’t a second slash, because Inori had casually stopped her blade with his bare hand.

“As soon as I knew you were feinting, it wasn’t too hard to catch your blade.”

“Grrr. Let go!”

“Okay.”

“Wha…”

He let go of her sword without any fuss, thoroughly confusing Maria. She backed away to put distance between them again.

“It’d be kinda sad if the warm-up ended so fast. Mm… I’ll give you about five more rounds. After that, I’m moving on.”

“I’ll make you regret not killing me.”

Ten minutes had passed.

“Hm… Yeah, it looks like I don’t need to go out of my way to make an iron sword if I can do this much without it. Think I’m better off just making more knives,” Inori muttered, examining his Black Wood Sword.

Meanwhile, Maria was out of breath and mana. Her sword had fallen to the ground, and she was tied up by Inori’s strings. Seemingly satisfied, Inori nodded and put his Black Wood Sword back in Shadow Storage before walking in front of Maria.

“Kill me,” she said, glaring at him.

“That’s the plan. I’m not really a fan of people begging me to kill them, though. Really *kills* the mood. Hm… I wonder if the transformation is done.”

“The…what?”

“Hm? Oh, I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to *them*.”

Maria’s brow furrowed as she tried to discern who he was talking about. It didn’t take long for her to realize that there were two black wolves

standing behind him. Her eyes widened as if to say, *Where did they come from?*

"Ah, I see. Okay—experiment time. Stand." As soon as Inori said these words, Maria saw the shadows of three people slowly rising from the ground.

"Elfaye... Miranda... Alice...?" It had to have been them, but at the same time, it wasn't. The whites of their eyes had turned red with blood, and their veins had also turned red, visible beneath their skin. Their teeth were sharp like fangs, and blood dripped from their mouths. They groaned, as if they were little more than beasts. The way they moved was not humanlike either. They had become something completely different.

"Vice Captain, I'd like you to help me out with one last experiment. Would you mind?"

"What do you..."

"Great! Okay—new Elfaye, new Miranda, new Alice..."

"Wait... No, please—"

"It's chow time."

"Please... Not that..."

"I have a fresh human for you. Be sure to savor her to the last bite."

"*Noooo*!!!"

Inori looked out the window while the sounds of ripping flesh, screams, and chewing filled the hall.

"Hmm. Wonder how it's goin' over there."

◇

Silence fell across the castle, almost as if all sound were being absorbed by the darkness, so heavy that it was barely pierced by the pale moonlight. The ground and air had lost all the heat that it had gained from the strong rays of the sun in the afternoon. Now, a cold so biting that it cut through to the bone blew across the castle.

In the midst of all this, an army of knights surrounded the castle. Usually, the knights had orders to kill any and all invaders, but not today. Today, they had orders to kill any inhabitants trying to escape.

A strong gust of wind blew across the knights. The cold air seeped through the cracks of their armor, robbing them of their body heat.

"Hm?" One of the knights seemed to have noticed something. It was a shadow. "Was that always there?" He searched his memories. At first, he only felt slight confusion, but ultimately, he began to realize that there was something very wrong about it. The shadow was moving, but not because of the wind. "Is that an animal or something?" He squinted as he stared at the shadow. In the next moment, though, the shadow jumped.

"Wh-Wha—" It jumped off of the roof, and right behind it were other, smaller shadows.

"What are those?!"

"Balls of fur?"

It didn’t take them long to finally realize what was approaching. The silhouettes of multiple beasts entered their vision.

“What the… They’re huge!”

“W-Wolves?!”

When the shadows had come close enough, the knights realized that the biggest one easily surpassed their own height. It ran at them, its claws clacking against the stone ground, letting out a vicious roar.

“What the hell?!”

“A monster?!”

“I’ve never seen such a huge beast!”

“Why is it coming from the castle?!”

Out of confusion, the knights broke formation. In that time, Fenrir came to stand on all fours, and positioned himself to attack. He exhaled, and in the same breath, hardened his fur, firing it at the knights.

“Agh—”

“Gwah—”

“Ack!”

The knights were pierced by the onslaught of hardened fur projectiles and blown away—bodies, armor, weapons, and all. The black fur bored holes into the knights, turning them as lifeless as dolls. It was a storm of armor scraps, blood, bones, flesh, arms, teeth, shield fragments, and black fur.

The pieces of flesh splattered across the ground, making squishy noises, while the armor and shield fragments left scars in the dirt. Trapped in the storm of violence, none even had a chance to scream in terror before they were torn apart.

After about ten seconds, Fenrir surveyed the carnage he had wrought and the land that had been transformed into a bloody lake.

“Comradesss… Retrieve the blooood…from the scattered fleshhh…”

“Yes, leader.”

“Are our actions acceptable?”

“Killing them goes against the covenant of the witch.”

The wolves weren’t abandoning their original territory to invade this land—however, the witch had asked them to protect the people of this country, and at the moment, they were doing anything but.

“Even if it is against her wishesss… We simply lose the land she bestowed upon ussss… Either way, we haaave…a new masterrrr. Besidessss… We’ve only killed rebelsss… We have not broken the covenant of the wiiitch.”

“If you say so.” The wolf who had spoken did not seem to fully accept his answer.

Even if they didn’t have any intention of protecting the royal family, though, it was true that they had killed rebels. So they were technically in the right, and hadn’t violated their covenant.

“Gooood… Let us continue circling the cassstle…and eradicate the remaining knightsss…”

“Understood.”

“Yes.”

“Very well.”

The four of them ran across the bloody lake, their shadows slowly disappearing into the dark night.

◇

I grabbed a book from the shelf and put it in my Shadow Storage. Then I took another book and used Omniscience, Clairvoyance, and Photographic Memory to save it in my head. It wasn’t especially hard work and was over pretty much as soon as I touched the book. Even so, if I didn’t get a move on, it’d be dawn before I knew it. So what I ended up doing was memorizing half of them and storing the other half in my Shadow Storage.

In the midst of my “kill everyone” strategy, there was one thing that I still wanted to do, and that was read all the books in the castle. I was able to read most of them with Clairvoyance and Omniscience, but there were still a lot that were kept under lock and key. Right now, my focus was trying to steal those books.

As soon as I detected a knight entering my range, I used Puppet Master to kill them with a knife. So far, the only people I’d actually tried to fight were the members of the War Maiden Battalion. I had known that they were pretty strong from training, so I had thought they’d serve as a good warm-up. Thanks to Photographic Memory, I already pretty much knew their habits and tendencies, so ultimately, it hadn’t been that hard of a fight.

I had gotten my wolves to drain the blood from their corpses, which had turned the war maidens into ghouls. Then, using my Baron-Class Authority, I’d made them attack the other knights in the castle. I wasn’t sure how complicated of an order they could follow, but thanks to my experiment, I now knew that they could at least follow simple instructions. Now it was time to use my ghouls and black wolves to create even more allies. Even if there were stragglers, I’d be able to pick them off after I finished getting through all the books I wanted.

“And…done.”

I finished scanning the last book and left the library. With Detect, I noticed two knights. I promptly used Omniscience to confirm their positions, and threw my knives so that they pierced their throats. Then I had my wolves turn them into ghouls.

From the looks of things, the black wolves were doing well, and my stats were also steadily rising. Any blood that my thralls drank counted as blood that I drank, so I got the stat increase from it. *Good grief, I love how convenient thralls are.*

In the end, though, it didn’t matter how strong I was if I was by myself. That was why I needed allies. Luckily for me, I had my handy-dandy thralls to make more allies for me. The more allies I had, the more I could

accomplish. Plus, I never had to worry about feeding them or where to keep them. I planned to keep making more and more thralls. At the same time, I wanted to avoid making any vampires at all costs. That'd just be annoying.

For reference, though, the ghouls that were following my orders because of my authority weren't my thralls. If I dyed them in my blood, they'd *become* thralls, but the ghouls prowling the castle right now weren't, which meant I couldn't store them in my Shadow Storage. My plan was to take only the strongest of them, make them my thralls, and store them in my Shadow Storage. Of course, that was only after everything was said and done.

"Next is here." I touched my hand to the door and discovered that it was locked physically instead of magically. It was a cinch to open it with Conqueror and Clairvoyance.

I used Conqueror on the entire lock, then used Clairvoyance to see inside the lock. Since the lock was small, it didn't take long for me to cover it with Conqueror and then use Puppet Master to move the parts necessary to unlock it.

I heard a click, signaling that I'd successfully opened it. "Nice." The rusted hinges of the door let out a creak as I opened it, and I was immediately greeted by the smell of moldy old books...and also some screams.

"Eek!"

"Wh-Who's there?!"

Um, that's my line.

Inside the room were a middle-aged noble and his daughter, who was wearing a very flashy dress. She had pale skin and blonde hair… She really reminded me of a certain gratitude-obsessed princess. But there was no way they were related. This girl had a huge rack.

Now that I thought about it, Detect had picked up traces of life inside the room, but I'd figured they were just rats or something. I had never expected that there'd be humans inside. Maybe I'd come to that conclusion because Detect had indicated a really weak presence inside. I'd only been worried about knights, so it was completely possible that I'd glossed over the possibility of the presence inside being humans, albeit weak ones.

"You… You're not a knight. Father—perhaps we're being rescued."

"Wait. Y-You're one of the servants of the heroes…"

As he said these words, his daughter grabbed onto him. But seriously, a servant of the heroes? That's what people thought of me?

"Please help us escape, Mr. Servant! We want to get away from that evil chancellor!"

"Ew, no."

"Huh...?"

"There's nothing in it for me." What would I gain from letting this old guy and his daughter get away? If anything, it'd just spell more trouble for me.

“I-I’ll grant you any wish! Money, women, drink, land—I’ll give you anything! Please... I beg you!”

“Sorry,” I said as I took a step into the library, a slight smile forming on my face. “I’ve already decided that I’m killing everyone here.”

At my words, the old guy’s face froze in fear. His daughter clung to him, crying, her body trembling as she cowered in fear. Hm, there’s an odd smell coming from her. Did she pee herself? Well, not that I care. I completely understand. It’s a logical response—it reduces the weight of the body, allowing you to run away faster.

“Wh-Why do you look like you’re having so much fun?!” the girl asked in a shaky voice as she soiled herself.

Hm? Fun? Why is she... Oh, I’m smiling. Huh. I guess this is kinda fun. But what about this, specifically, is fun? Killing people doesn’t really excite me or anything. It was simply that I’d decided to have fun. That was why I was enjoying myself.

“Oh, I know. You’re nobles, right? Then you should know that entertainment is everything. You’re not living if you’re not trying to enjoy yourself.” I took another step forward. “So if I’m committing a massacre, I might as well have fun while doing it, right?”

“Eek!” The girl was completely still, her expression twisted with fear.

“Well, anyway—nothing personal.”

From the old library rang two screams and the sound of flesh tearing. The dark night still had yet to let up.

◇

“They’re late...”

In the training hall stood the figure of a knight, her silver armor glistening. It was Aegiana. After locking the heroes up in the dungeon, she’d made her way here by herself. However, no matter how long she waited, nobody else showed up. At first, she thought that there must have been some sort of holdup with the suppression of the castle, but even so, this was taking too long.

They were to meet here after they had completed their tasks. But as of this moment, Aegiana was the only one present. She stood on the gray stone floor of the spacious training hall, illuminated by the pale light of the light fixtures that she powered with her mana. It was a space large enough for their occasional army exercises. And in that huge space, Aegiana stood utterly alone.

Several hours had passed, but there was no sign of anyone coming. She considered leaving to check the castle, even though that would be disobeying the orders she’d been given. But before she could entertain the idea any further, she heard a strange noise.

“What is that...?”

The sound originated from the sky. In the dim moonlight, a shadowy figure flapped its wings, slowly descending towards her. Aegiana didn’t let

her guard down for a second, staring right at it with her hand on the hilt of her sheathed silver blade.

As it came closer, its shape was more discernible. It looked like a huge bat, but its body was obviously not a bat's. It had hands, feet, a head, and wore clothes. It was without a doubt human-shaped but had the wings of a bat. The clothes it wore were black—a black dress shirt, black pants, black gloves, with a black right eye and black wings. Its left eye was a gold color that could easily be seen through the darkness.

The individual folded its wings in midair and landed on top of a wall in the training hall. Then he stood up, with the black sky as his backdrop. Only then did the light of the training hall reveal who he was.

"You're..." The light flickered across his face, one that Aegiana knew all too well. The only difference was that there was no eyepatch. Aegiana stared up at him in surprise.

"The moon's beautiful, isn't it, Captain?"

"Inori?"

The flickering white lights of the training ground, the dim moonlight, and distant starlight reflected the faces of a female knight in silver armor and a black-clad vampire.

“What are you trying to say? Actually…what’s that on your back?”

“Oh, these?” Inori spread his bat-like wings. At some point, he’d raised his Flight Skill to level 4 and his Poise to level 6. Now, he could at least fly from point A to point B without any difficulties.

“Those wings…” Aegiana glared at Inori’s back. “They’re devil wings. Inori, you bastard! You sold your soul to the demons?!”

People could change into demons by forming a pact with one. As a result of this pact, they’d gain certain distinguishing features, such as wings or horns. Demons were followers of the god of darkness. Signing a contract with them meant joining their side.

“I *believed* in you! What happened to your pride as a human?!” Aegiana roared. However, Inori seemed wholly unfazed and uninterested.

“You ‘believed’ in me? What, did you sympathize with me because I was weak? How stupid. I never had any pride to begin with.”

“You…”

“Plus, I didn’t sell my soul.”

“Huh…?” Aegiana raised her eyebrows at this seemingly contradictory statement.

For his part, however, Inori saw no problems with what he’d said. He *had* no pride. He would use whatever he could and discard whatever he needed to if it meant achieving his goals.

However, selling one’s soul meant being subject to another’s whims—it was unbearable. Inori would never consider that, not even for a moment. He refused to answer to anyone but himself. He was the ultimate being of ego and selfishness.

“I live for nobody but myself. I don’t need demons.”

“Do you mean to say that you don’t need anyone else…?”

“Yeah—basically.”

Aegiana’s expression soured at his response. “For what purpose do you live, Inori?”

“*To* live.”

Though Inori’s response was curt, it showed exactly what kind of person he was.

Aegiana let her gaze fall to the ground and began to speak in a low voice. “I learned a lesson from my maiden battle…” Her face filled with sorrow. “Living is difficult…and tiring.” Filled with frustration or perhaps shame, she clenched a fist so hard it began to shake. “Those who think they know everything and claim that they’ll use anyone they can to survive… Those who don’t care what happens to anyone else so long as their own survival is assured—those people have always lived in peace, far from any place where they would need to risk their lives.” She raised her head and looked straight at Inori. “The desire to live, the fear of death…these feelings are as nothing. Frail, weak. There is no one alive who has experienced the pain of death. Yet the battlefield abounds with it. To the point where it

becomes trifling. In fact, on the battlefield, death might even seem like the more attractive option." None understood that death could be both a terror and a mercy. "The stronger the person, the more close encounters with death they have. That's why one must have a strong reason to live like the strong. Whether it's for family, the one you love, revenge, lust, conquest, sadism, or masochism—it doesn't matter, but the reason must exist." Aegiana leered at Inori. "So here's the thing, Inori—merely wanting to live will surely backfire on you. I'm sure you don't recognize that you've sold your soul. Your failure to understand that is your weakness."

"Uh-huh. You done yet?"

"Wha…" Aegiana's jaw dropped at Inori's flippant answer to her lecture.

He exhaled. "Man, you sure do like talking down to me," he said, sitting cross-legged before her.

Aegiana couldn't believe her eyes. They stood upon the field of battle—how dare he face her like this? But Inori was merely setting the tone. He hadn't yet recognized this as a confrontation. As for Aegiana, she had yet to perceive Inori as an enemy. To her, he was still her pupil.

"Let me ask you something. Do fleas have a reason to live? They probably work harder to survive than any of us, but I doubt they spare a single thought for that." Inori wasn't sure if fleas had been discovered in this world, but regardless, he continued. "Plus, I think the true nature of living things is rejection." Even the simplest of organisms were constituted of membranes, DNA, and enzymes. Those were the things that defined them as living organisms. And in general, living organisms existed by enacting the same three processes: reproduction, homeostasis, and adapting to external pressures. "In the end, the act of living is nothing but fighting against the efflorescence of the world outside yourself, and making it your enemy. There's no deeper meaning to any of it."

"I've no clue what you're talking about."

"I wasn't saying any of this to increase your understanding. Nor am I trying to deny you your agency. I simply want you to see me as an enemy." Inori placed his elbow on his knee, and rested his face in his hand. "You look like you want me to ask you what *you* live for, so I'll bite. Tell me."

Though confused, Aegiana spoke in a firm voice. "I live for my country. I've pledged my life to it."

As soon as those words left her mouth, Inori clicked his tongue in annoyance. "I'd expected something more, but…well, whatever." Inori slowly got to his feet and brushed the dirt from his pants. "Anyway, I'd like to ask you for a favor…Little Miss Patriot. Would you kindly give up on your country?"

"Wha…? Have you gone mad? Why would I?"

"I'm simply asking you to give up on the coup."

"You want me to betray my country?" Aegiana asked, dubiously.

“Oh, you’re so silly, Captain. We’re *way* past betrayal. All the knights have been taken out and restrained, including the chancellor. You’re the last one standing.”

“Huh?” Aegiana made a sound of sheer befuddlement. “What ridiculous drivel are you spouting? There’s no way that…”

“I’m not lying. I took care of them all. You can believe me because it’s coming right from the horse’s mouth. But I guess…seeing is believing, huh?” Inori snapped his fingers, and at once a black wolf emerged from the shadow of the training hall.

“What…? A monster?”

Though the appearance of the wolf surprised her, it was what was in the wolf’s mouth that drew her gaze. It was dragging something. A person. Their eyes and mouth were covered by a black cloth, and their body was bound by black rope. Upon closer inspection, it was a man. Judging from his physique as well as his hair color and style, Aegiana could tell who it was.

“Alec…?”

“Oh, wow—bingo! Good on you for remembering a new recruit’s name!”

The wolf dropped the man to the stone floor. His body was riddled with wounds and bruises, but he appeared to still be alive. It sounded as though he was trying to scream or perhaps just breathe through the cloth he was gagged with. His body twisted as he tried to break his restraints.

“Impossible… How could you defeat a knight who had magic armor?”

“Um, hello?” Inori pointed to his wings, spreading them again. “And didn’t you see that monster over there? I didn’t enter a contract with a demon or anything—I’ve had this power from the start. I just hid it from you. This wolf is my thrall. You summoned a hero and got a demon instead. Isn’t that hilarious?”

“Wh…What do you…?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about destroying this country for a while. This coup was honestly just a stroke of luck. Just like Alec over here, the knights and the chancellor are still alive.” As soon as he said those words, wolves began appearing around them carrying other knights, also bound, which they promptly dropped on the ground. Among their number was someone who resembled the captain of the first squad, as well as the members of the War Maiden Battalion.

They were all bereft of their magic armor, bound by black rope and left to roll around on the ground. By the time he was done, around ten bodies lay at Inori’s feet. They were all moaning in pain. At last, one wolf brought out another human. From his physique and unique garb, it was easy to tell that he was the chancellor.

“I can keep going,” Inori said.

“That’s…enough…”

“Okay. Then let’s get to the point.” Inori raised his hand, which was apparently the signal for all the wolves to place their mouths around the necks of the hostages. If they put even a little bit of strength into their jaws,

they'd bite their heads clean off. "As you can see, I hold their lives and the lives of the other knights in the palm of my hand. Surrender if you wish to rescue them from the literal jaws of death. If you don't, I'll kill them immediately. The people here will die quickly as their heads are severed, but I'll be sure to kill the other knights with much more sadistic methods."

Inori produced a certain woman's corpse and threw it at Aegiana. The body made a sick thud as it landed at her feet. It was covered in blood and bite marks. The expression upon its face, stained with tears and blood, was one of complete terror. It was the vice captain, Maria.

"I'm not too creative, though, so when I say 'sadistic,' I just mean having them be eaten alive by monsters. Oh—maybe I'll have the War Maiden Battalion pleasure me too, before they go. You *do* have a lot of beauties..."

"Maria..." Aegiana closed her eyes. Her body began to tremble as she held the woman's corpse.

"Depending on your answer, I'll spare everyone else. It's too dangerous for you to stay alive, so of course surrendering means I'll kill you, but...trading one life for a thousand isn't a bad deal." With his silhouette lit from behind by the moon, Inori looked down upon her and spread his arms dramatically. "Please, feel free to surrender. I'd like to avoid fighting you if at all possible. It'd be utterly pointless, anyway. It's too late. There's nothing left you can do. The country you knew doesn't exist anymore. You've lost your reason to live." Just like Inori had lost interest in Aegiana. "Now, say that you'll die to save them."

His hypnosis spell could be resisted if the target had a strong enough will, so in order for Inori to be sure he could kill her, he had to break her spirit first. He had to make her drop her guard, make her accept death and surrender as her fate. Only then could he successfully hypnotize her. Everything he'd said up till now had just been a means to get her into that state. "Go on. Tell me that you don't mind dying, Captain," Inori said, grinning.

At that exact moment, a dull sound rang out, and Inori's eyes widened with surprise. Aegiana had thrust her sheathed sword into the stone ground, eyes closed, bowing her head as she stood beside Maria's body.

Not understanding the meaning of her actions, Inori asked, "What are you doing, Captain?"

"Silent prayer," Aegiana answered curtly, not opening her eyes. "For my ally who endured humiliation and lost her life…and for my allies who are going to die."

"Oh?"

"I'll give you your answer, Inori Takafuji." Aegiana opened her eyes and faced Inori, who looked like a deer caught in headlights. She unsheathed her silver sword. "I refuse."

"Huh...?"

There was nothing reflected in her eyes but Inori. "I've given it some rational thought. You single-handedly defeated and incapacitated the

knights. You are a profound threat to this country, and I must eliminate you."

Inori could feel his heartbeat quickening. The corners of his mouth began to curl upwards. "I'm gonna kill them all, you know."

"They will be sacrifices for the posterity of this country. No matter how rotten they've become, they are still knights. They should be prepared to die, no matter how brutal their deaths are."

"Uh, but your country doesn't have a king or an army. What's left to protect?"

"The people. Don't forget about them. I will protect them. I will give my life for this country. If I allow you to escape, you may terrorize the people. That cannot be allowed."

In her mind, she held an image of the perfect country. Its purpose was to protect the people. For that ideal, she had betrayed her queen and was prepared to discard the chancellor too. She was incredibly egotistical and devoted to a fault. Though she may have had empathy and concern for the future of the young, at her core, she was twisted beyond repair.

"No matter how warped or damaged this country becomes…I will live and die for it."

Even if the knights were tortured to death, even if the members of the War Maiden Battalion were violated and then killed, even if she betrayed and then was betrayed in turn—she would not stray from her path of endlessly toiling for the country. Even if it was rotten and falling apart at the seams, she would lay down her life for it. This had nothing to do with her fealty as a knight; her mind was simply abnormal. As soon as Inori understood that, he felt ecstasy like he'd never felt before.

Inori had never met someone as fantastic as her. "Heh heh…" As waves of ecstasy crashed over him, laughter escaped his lips.

"Aegiana—please allow me to apologize for my rudeness. I shouldn't have tried to deceive you."

Inori brought out eight knives from his Shadow Storage and held them in both of his hands. He spread his legs and assumed a fighting stance. Suddenly, the black rope, blindfolds, and gags on the knights disappeared, revealing bright red eyes. Guttural, beast-like growls escaped from their mouths. Their movements weren't natural. It was as if something was controlling them. All together, they began to walk towards Aegiana, devotedly following the order that had been issued to them—*kill her*.

"Everything I said was a complete lie. The chancellor, the War Maiden Battalion, the knights—I killed *everyone.* And I made them my ghouls."

Aegiana's eyes widened. There were no more lies, and the scene that lay before her was proof of that.

"I see… I see…" Aegiana's face was wrought with anger. Her gaze snapped up to Inori, and she pointed her silver blade at him. "You truly are my enemy."

“Yep. And you’re *my* enemy.” The smile on Inori’s face was rife with ecstasy and killing intent, but genuine.

The high-pitched clang of metal striking metal rang out across the training hall. Aegiana swung the white blade she held in her right hand, scattering black fragments into the air. The debris looked like diamond dust as it reflected the light from the training hall. By now, Inori had already forgotten how many knives he’d thrown. Still, he continued to use Puppet Master to send his black iron knives along various trajectories to attack Aegiana, but she didn’t even break a sweat deflecting them. She quickly cut the knives down before they made contact with her, showering the area around her with broken fragments of them.

“Grrr...” The ghouls that tried attacking Aegiana were also cut down without even a hint of hesitation. No matter what came for her, whether it was knife, ghoul, or wolf, she cut them all down with her blade, rendering them useless.

Inori scowled, once again reflecting on how incredibly annoying her blade was. He took a moment to use Appraisal on it and then cursed internally as he realized it was even more of a cheat item than Ariya had initially explained.

```
Zekkinotachi (Creator: Unknown)
Quality: SSS / Value: 500000000 Dells / Ability: Omnislice
An Artifact. A discovery from an ancient civilization, forged
with lost technology. Can cut through anything if the user
supplies mana to the blade. Anything that touches the blade
while it is infused with mana will be cut and broken to bits.
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This blade could cut more than magic and magic circles—it could cut through *anything*. She didn’t even have to swing the blade fast or hard, since anything that made contact with it would be cut. All she had to do was choose its target. It was a gorgeous blade, designed to be used in swift motions.

Next, Inori used Appraisal on the blade in her left hand as well as her armor.

```
Pure Mithril Sword (Creator: Unknown)
Quality: SS+ / Value: 30000000 / Ability: Magic Appendage
An Artifact. A discovery from an ancient civilization, forged
with lost technology. A sword composed of pure mithril whose
blade allows the user to wield magic freely, enabling the
casting of spells without the use of magic circles.

Magic Armor Manual (Creator: Rising Sun Kingdom)
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Quality: A+ / Value: 5100 Dells / Ability: Body Fortification, Hardening
The manual version of the regular magic armor, forged by personal request. The automatic activation of body fortification has been removed. The user must manually infuse the specific locations they want to fortify with mana. The average person cannot use this armor—however, it grants more maneuverability than the auto version.

These two were pretty much exactly as Ariya had described them—however, Inori hadn't expected how well all three of them would synergize. Aegiana fortified her armor to enhance her speed, while only infusing her Zekkinotachi with mana the moment its blade came into contact with his knives. Due to her expert control of her mana, she was able to minimize the resource expenditure while maximizing her equipment's abilities.

This was particularly helpful when it came to Zekkinotachi, which was incredibly expensive to operate. There was no one but her who could have used it for as long as she was doing right now. Not to mention, she had yet to cast any spells using her Pure Mithril Sword.

Somehow or other, the most unbalanced items in the world had found their way to the most unbalanced human in the world, resulting in the monster that stood in front of Inori. If he stepped into melee range, she'd cut him down with Zekkinotachi. If he kept his distance, she could fire magic at him. His physical attacks could be destroyed, and his magical attacks could be deflected with a barrier cast by her Pure Mithril Sword. There were absolutely no openings available to him. She truly lived up to her title as "Humanity's Strongest."

The greatest surprise of all was that she was somehow able to track and deal with the erratic trajectory of Inori's knives. It was hard to say whether this was thanks to her sharp instincts or not. Perhaps it was impossible to avoid his knives, but they could certainly be broken.

As soon as Inori brought out new knives, Aegiana enhanced the strength in the armor on her legs and quickly closed in on him, swinging her sword. Her attack was about as fast as Fenrir, but it was much more precise.

"Crap—she's fast." His Eye of True Vision allowing him to see every last one of Aegiana's movements, Inori desperately tried to evade the blade that was clearly headed for his heart.

There was the sound of flesh being severed as Inori's right hand flew off. Still, he used this chance to continue evading, putting distance between the two of them. He recognized how bad the situation was. Aegiana clearly had higher stats than Fenrir, and Evasion at level 4 wasn't enough to allow him to dodge her attacks.

At that point, Aegiana turned her back to Inori, taking a moment to destroy the knife that his right hand had held. Inori was impressed by her thoroughness and awareness. Losing one of his gauntlets was very

unfortunate, especially since it had the hypnosis spell on it. But at the very least, the shadow from his hand remained.

Then, she once again faced Inori, who'd just regenerated his right hand and was already throwing another eight knives. They flew around the training hall in all directions, not showing even the slightest sign of slowing down. Then, he commanded five of them to attack Aegiana while focusing his attention on controlling one of the remaining three.

"Take this."

As soon as the five knives entered her strike range, the single knife he'd been focused on flew out of the shadow cast by his right hand into her blind spot. Until now, he'd only shown her his Puppet Master Ability. She had no clue about his other abilities, including Shadow Storage. There was no way she should have been able to predict this attack.

But in the next moment, Inori's eyes widened with surprise. Aegiana had immediately slashed three times to deal with the five knives as they came within range of her. As she dealt with those, the knife from his Shadow Storage was headed towards her, but it was quickly knocked away by her mithril sword, which she had swiftly swung around to her back. At once, she spun around and cut it with Zekkinotachi, destroying it.

"You've got to be kidding me…"

This was no longer a matter of mere instinct. She had to have been sensing the knives somehow. Inori began to formulate a hypothesis. "The mana that I feel in this training hall… If it's all *her* mana, then…"

"Inori," Aegiana called out, interrupting his train of thought.

"What?"

"I've never seen this kind of throwing knife technique before. I can only think you held back during training."

"Oh no—I'm just a beast at night."

"Is that a form of sexual harassment…?"

In the midst of their idle chatter, Inori focused Detect on his target and increased its precision…discovering that his hypothesis was right on the money.

"I never knew that you had your own form of Detect. It's almost equal to mine too."

Aegiana trembled slightly at Inori's words, but ultimately just exhaled. "So, you discovered it with your Divine Blessing…"

Her response was more than enough to confirm his hypothesis. Inori had used Detect to establish that the mana covering the area was being released from Aegiana. There were three layers to Aegiana's mana, in concentric spheres around her. The first sphere went as far as the range of her Pure Mithril Sword. The second reached the tip of Zekkinotachi, which was longer. The third extended to cover the entirety of the training hall.

Inori might not have known the finer details, but he could at least hazard a guess as to why she could sense everything around her. In essence,

because of how her mana suffused the space, she had no blind spots. Surprise attacks were useless against her.

"Why would you need my Detect if you've had that ability all this time?"

"I'd prefer to keep my abilities secret, for one. Plus, it isn't perfect. People with good instincts can still sense my mana, so it's not suited for covert operations."

"Oh, I see." This response wasn't meant to further the conversation, but to instead give him time to figure out a weakness he could exploit.

The only drawback he could be certain of was that she could be sensed via her mana. Inori further postulated that she couldn't use her ability to sense things in the ground. Detect confirmed this theory, but that didn't help Inori too much because he didn't have any surprise attacks that he could launch from the ground.

"So let me guess—you're already completely aware of what I've been up to."

"I suppose you're referring to the strings? They're made of the same material as those ropes and cloth from before."

"Aw, man... You really did notice."

As they spoke, Inori had continued manipulating Gleipnir, but it turned out that Aegiana was aware of what he was doing. Thus, he moved on to his next plan. If she couldn't sense things in the ground, that would go for things emerging from his Shadow Storage as well. When he'd unleashed that knife from the shadow cast by his hand, she'd merely reacted to it. She hadn't sensed it ahead of time.

The only problem was that Inori didn't have anything in his Shadow Storage that would suit his needs. Even if he attacked with more knives, Aegiana was sure to cut them down. The only choice he had was to launch an attack she didn't know about from the shadows.

"Let me ask you a question: what power is it that allows you to control your knives and strings?"

"I have no obligation to answer you. Fenrir!" At Inori's beckoning, Fenrir appeared in the training hall. Inori's plan now was to seal Aegiana's movements.

"My masterrr... What is thy willll...?"

"See her over there? Go crazy."

"Understooood!"

"Two against one?" Aegiana asked. "Don't you know the meaning of fair play?"

"Once you're my enemy, I'll use anything and everything against you that I can."

"I should've realized that you're that kind of person from your escapades in the dungeon."

Fenrir roared and began to unleash his long-range attack. Unlike Inori's knives, which followed all kinds of different trajectories, Fenrir's fur could

only be fired in a straight line. However, a *ton* of it would go in that one direction.

Even so, it seemed that Aegiana was able to handle the attack. Inori let out a sigh of disappointment as she cut the crystallized shards of fur the same way she had his knives.

Still, while her slashes may have outpaced the shards, she remained in a difficult position. It was all she could do to defend against the attack. She couldn't move from where she was standing, meaning that Inori had accomplished his goal. While she was pinned down, Inori ran along the edge of the training hall.

He pulled his Black Wood Sword out of his Shadow Storage. After gaining enough distance, he raised the sword as if getting ready to thrust it. Then he faced Aegiana and used Leap.

"Foolish move, Inori!"

Sensing his approach, Aegiana erected a strong magical barrier between herself and Fenrir's barrage.

"Hnn?!" Fenrir grunted, surprised by Aegiana's ability to fend off his attack. Aegiana was now afforded a reprieve in which she could hold her sword at the ready to intercept Inori.

Inori clicked his tongue in annoyance as he thrust his Black Wood Sword at her. However, its reach was shorter than Zekkinotachi's. As soon as his right arm entered its sphere, the arm was severed, and the sword it had been holding flew in the complete opposite direction of Aegiana.

She wasted no time in preparing the blade in her left hand. The Pure Mithril Sword was slower due to the fact that it did not possess the same kind of ability as Zekkinotachi. However, demons were weak to mithril. Even if Inori had amazing regenerative abilities, a cut from mithril would surely be fatal.

Inori knew that he'd take critical damage if his body came within reach of her sword, but he already expected this attack. He'd predicted that this would be her goal, so right before he entered the range of her blade, he stopped the movement of his body in its tracks.

"Wha— Strings?!"

Tied around Inori's body were the Gleipnir threads that he'd strung across the training hall. She had no clue about its ability to shrink, so of course she couldn't have known that right as he was about to enter the strike range of her sword, he'd infused mana into the strings to make them shrink and halt his movements. It was the same kind of trick he'd used against the members of the War Maiden Battalion.

With this little stunt, Inori had accomplished his goal. His severed right arm had flown up into the air, towards one of the lighting fixtures in the training hall. The shadow it cast fell at Aegiana's feet, and from within this shadow, the upper bodies of wolves emerged, clamping their sharp teeth around her legs.

Aegiana made a sound of pain, her face contorting as she cut at the wolves with Zekkinotachi. The slain wolves melted into a black liquid before disappearing.

“Fenrir, don’t let her heal!”

“Roooar!!!” Fenrir had repositioned himself around the barrier to once again begin his long-range assault.

Meanwhile, Inori commanded Gleipnir to shrink even more, putting further distance between him and Aegiana.

“Tsk. How infuriating!” Aegiana had returned to defending herself against Fenrir’s attack. She shouldn’t have had any time to cast a spell, but all the same, Inori noticed her legs slowly healing.

“Dammit. The mithril sword’s ability...” Inori recalled that it enabled her to cast spells without magic circles. Still, though, it only enabled the spell to be cast. That didn’t mean it could be invoked at full strength. “This is a race against time.”

“Roooar!”

“Tsk!” Aegiana cursed internally, wondering if there was a limit to how many shards Fenrir could fire. She could discern that the attack came from Fenrir’s body, but there seemed to be no end to it, which was enough to frustrate even a generally coolheaded person like Aegiana.

At that moment, she noticed that Inori was missing. No sooner had she wondered where he’d gone than her question was answered. Inori appeared before her with his left eye glowing yellow. He peered straight into her eyes. She did not recognize the magic circle forming in front of his eye, but all the same, she immediately cut it with Zekkinotachi.

“Damn.” Inori clicked his tongue in frustration.

“What was that?”

“A hypnosis spell of sorts,” Inori answered curtly, quickly repositioning himself.

Up until a little while ago, Inori had been her student. Now, they were enemies trying to kill each other. She glanced at him, and another question rose to her lips.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Smiling? Me?”

“Yes.”

“I guess...’cause it’s fun?”

“Fun?” asked Aegiana, parroting Inori’s response.

Inori looked at the back of his left hand. “Aren’t you having fun, Aegiana?” he asked, sounding confused.

“I suppose... Yes, a little.”

This was the first time in a while that she’d fought someone strong enough to go toe to toe with her. Aegiana was someone who found enjoyment in doing battle with someone strong—in fighting them to the death.

“By the way…where I come from, ‘the moon is beautiful’ is a famous phrase for proposing to someone. If you accept, you’re supposed to say, ‘I can die happy.’ Weird, isn’t it?”

“So you proposed to me earlier, and I rejected you?”

“Don’t be stupid. That was never my intention.”

“Oh, really?” said Aegiana. “Then shall I propose to you instead?”

“At that point, *I’d* reject *you*.”

“Hmph. As expected, I suppose.”

“But…this is definitely the most fun I’ve had in my life.” Right after these words, Inori’s left eye glowed yellow in front of Aegiana.

At the very same time, a large magic circle had been etched into the air. Aegiana immediately tried to cut the magic circle like before, but this one was much faster. Barely even a tenth of a second had passed before it was complete, and activated. And from the circle behind her, Inori emerged. It was his ace in the hole—teleportation.

◇

Inori had used hypnosis the first time in order to lay the groundwork for his next move. To hypnotize someone, the magic circle needed to be reflected in the eyes of his target, which meant that there was a necessary delay before it could take effect.

In contrast, aside from the flashy effects, there was no delay between the activation of the summoning magic circle and the actual summoning. Inori had used the difference in time taken to cast each of these spells to his advantage. The second time he had attempted to use hypnosis on her, it had prompted her to try to cut the magic circle in the same way as before. However, by that time, Inori had already teleported.

Even if she had wanted to correct the trajectory of her blade, it wasn’t easy to do so. In the time that it took her to adjust her slash, Inori grabbed her right hand with his left, and stopped its movements completely.

Aegiana let out a grunt. Inori thrust the Dark Iron Dagger gripped in his right hand at her throat. She tried to dodge it by bending her upper body backwards, but with her right hand still in Inori’s grip, she lost her balance.

Even though she tried to keep her balance with her legs and core, she couldn’t use her right hand, and at this distance, Inori’s knife would meet her throat before the mithril sword in her left hand could even touch him.

“Air Hammer.” So, Aegiana unleashed a spell upon her own left hand, using the compressed air that this wind magic spell generated to explosively propel her left arm. She felt her elbow creaking under the extreme force, but she used the momentum from this spell to aim her sword at Inori’s heart and right hand.

Inori met Aegiana’s unexpected counterattack with a calm glare. He knew that he had to divert the attack, which aimed to cut his arm in two and pierce his heart. Inori ceased his own attack, throwing away his knife, and stretched his right arm towards the sword. The blade cut him right between his ring and middle fingers.

When very focused, time appears to slow to a crawl. This was a phenomenon that both Inori and Aegiana were experiencing at this moment. The blade sliced right through Inori's hand and continued cutting past his wrist. Inori slowly moved his upper arm to point his elbow up. He managed to get the blade between his ulna and radius, and was able to divert it upwards. The blade severed his ligaments, bones, shirt, and muscle fibers. Still, it did not stop.

The trajectory of the slash had been diverted slightly, sending bits of his elbow and radius flying. It sliced through part of his deltoid before finally cutting off Inori's head entirely.

Losing strength in her hand, Aegiana released the mithril blade, which flew away with the force of the spell that had initially propelled it. Blood spurted from where Inori's head and right arm used to be, before his headless body fell to its knees and then to the ground.

Aegiana had been able to spread her mana across the room to use her version of Detect partly because of the support that the Pure Mithril Sword had provided. While it was still possible for her to do this without the blade, it was much more difficult for her to maintain. Besides, she couldn't ignore Fenrir. So, she forcefully spread her mana across the training hall.

"Nooo! Masterrr!!!"

Fenrir had leapt at Aegiana from behind, but with a broad stroke of Zekkinotachi, she cut deep into his massive body.

"Gaaaah!" In his last moments, Fenrir cried out to the ceiling before his body dissolved into a blackish liquid and disappeared.

After confirming he'd disappeared, Aegiana exhaled and fell to her knees, her breathing ragged. Having forced herself to spread her mana across the room without the assistance of the mithril blade, she was running almost on empty. She was on the verge of suffering from mana depletion. It was possible for the mana that had been dispersed to return to her if she had the Pure Mithril Sword, but without it, she'd essentially thrown all that mana away.

As her breathing grew more labored, she looked over at Inori's head, lying on the ground. A demon's weakness was mithril. No matter how strong the regenerative ability was, using mithril to sever a head or pierce a heart would spell death.

Clutching her now useless left hand to her, she stood up and tottered towards his severed head. She may have killed him without hesitation for the sake of her country, but Aegiana was still human. The one she'd cut down may have been a demon, but he was also once her student. It was impossible for her not to feel something. She cradled his head in her right arm and silently prayed.

When she was done, she opened her eyes. "I must go..." She began to move towards the castle.

As soon as she did this, however, she heard a slight breeze. As she turned around, she saw Inori's body, which had been lying on the ground just moments earlier, flying full speed at her.

"Wha—" Aegiana couldn't believe her eyes. Without a head, the body should have been little more than morbid decoration.

She tried to ready Zekkinotachi, but the head in her hand was in the way, preventing her from moving how she wanted to. At that moment, Inori's body changed its posture in midair, landing a kick to Aegiana's gut.

"Gah!"

Using Leap Lv. 10 and Dropkick Lv. 10 was Inori's strongest combo. Aegiana's body folded into a "V" shape as she flew into the wall of the training hall. Not wasting a minute, Inori threw two knives. One of these managed to sever a tendon in Aegiana's hand.

She groaned as she lost her grip strength and dropped Zekkinotachi. The other knife bounced off as it collided with the falling sword. Meanwhile, Inori's body grabbed its head from her arms and pushed it back into place on its neck. As he regenerated, blood squirmed around the wound as if it were a living thing.

"Ahem… Test. Test. Okay, we're good." Inori rolled his neck to double-check that everything was working before walking over to Aegiana.

"How…? I know I cut you with my mithril sword. There should be no way that you still draw breath."

"Well, as you can see, I'm good as new." After all, Inori had always had a feeling that the head wasn't very important to vampires.

During his battle with Fenrir, even though his spinal cord had been hit, he wasn't paralyzed. This time, however, Inori had purposely delayed his regeneration. He'd previously experimented with this during his battle with the War Maiden Battalion. He'd also discovered that, even after losing his head, he was able to control his body. This only further drove home the fact that the heart, not the head, was the most important thing to a vampire.

"Apparently mithril has no effect on my body."

Inori's weakness was different from that of the vampires of this world. He was weak to *silver*, not mithril.

After a few moments of glaring at Inori, Aegiana let out a sigh. "I lost..."

Inori remained silent. It was basically just a fluke that he was alive right now. Prior to this, his only real battle experience had been Fenrir. Excluding the warm-up he'd had with the vice captain, this was the first time he'd truly fought another person.

Inori lacked battle sense. He knew that even with all the cheats he had—his eyes, his analytic ability and tactics—he greatly lacked experience. All the same, Inori believed that the one left standing in the end was the victor. A win was a win.

After this bout of self-reflection, Inori once again faced Aegiana. "Your MP is pretty much at zero. There's no fortifying your armor or using your version of Detect."

“True… I don’t even have the strength to stand. So, what now? Will you kill me?” she asked, with a weak smile. “Or perhaps you will abduct me? Rape me, then discard me? I suppose you could torture me too.”

To be fair, Inori also had the option of turning her into his servant, but he wasn’t interested. There was little to no chance that she’d discard her country to serve him. Even if she did, he’d lose interest in her at that point. There was no reason to make her a vampire.

“None of the above. There’s nothing in it for me, and I’m not into any of that stuff.”

“I thought as much. I wouldn’t mind if *you* did that to me, though.”

Inori found her words slightly surprising. “I was expecting you to say something more along the lines of, ‘I’d rather die now by your hand than endure your humiliation!’”

“Did someone else say that to you? Anyway, I’m simply buying time.”

“Do you believe backup is on the way?”

“No. But it’s okay if I fantasize about a hero swooping in and saving me, isn’t it? I’m just a person who doesn’t know when to give up. Even now, I haven’t given up on my country.”

Inori let out a laugh before crouching before Aegiana. “As much as I don’t mind what you’re doing, I can’t really spare the time. I’m not about to play along with your silly little scheme. I’m killing you, right here and now.”

Inori placed his hand on Aegiana’s shoulder and opened his mouth. She could see pointed fangs inside.

“You’re a vampire?” she asked with surprise.

“Yeah. So…you know what I’m gonna do next, don’t you?”

And with that, Inori plunged his fangs into her neck.

Footsteps echoed out across the dungeon. The three heroes were still in their cell, so it was clear that the sound originated from someone else.

“Who’s there? Captain?” Tamaki questioned the approaching figure. However, there was no response.

Aoi had been slumped over, but now raised her head to look out of the cell. When the person had come close enough, the dim lights of the dungeon revealed a familiar face. He may have been wearing a black shirt they’d never seen before and bereft of his usual eyepatch, but his face was unmistakably the face of their acquaintance.

“Inori…?” Ryuto asked, his voice low and surprised.

“Yep. Wow, you guys look like crap,” Inori said nonchalantly, looking at the three of them.

“A-Are you here to save us?” Ryuto pressed him.

“More importantly—are you okay, Inori?! You’re not hurt, are you?” Tamaki gripped the bars of the cell, trying to get a better look at him.

“I was so worried…” Aoi’s face relaxed with relief.

Seeing their reactions made Inori release a slight sigh. “You should be worried about yourselves. You two may be even bigger softies than Ryuto.”

Inori pulled a certain magic tool out of his Shadow Storage and approached the lock near the cell door. There was the sound of something unlocking. Inori gripped one of the bars lightly and tugged the adamantite door open with ease, leaving the three heroes in utter disbelief.

“Wait, what?! What did you do?”

“There are other ways to open this door without magic. The captain was nice enough to tell me about this tool. Come on, get out here.”

As the three of them exited the cell, Ryuto still seemed confused. “You’re…really saving us?” he asked.

“Well…you’ll be better off than in there, at least.” Inori nodded, a slight smile on his face.

“Huh?”

Inori’s left eye glowed yellow, reflecting a magic circle in Tamaki’s eyes.

“Wha—” In the next instant, Tamaki’s eyes went unfocused, and the muscles in her face relaxed.

“T-Tamaki?” Ryuto simply looked at her in confusion. He still had yet to grasp the situation.

In the meantime, Inori had turned to Aoi, who’d immediately erected a barrier.

“Good instincts…but pointless.” Inori once again activated his magic circle. It bypassed the barrier easily, placing Aoi under hypnosis as well.

“I-Inori, what are you—”

“You’re so slow.”

Ryuto had assumed a fighting stance, but Inori instantly closed in on him and held his arms to his sides before activating his hypnosis again.

“What…*is* this?!”

“Wow.” Inori was surprised that Ryuto was somewhat able to resist the hypnosis. “Raise your hands.”

“Whoa!” Ryuto yelped in shock as his body moved exactly as Inori had commanded.

“Hm…” Inori put his hand to his chin and began thinking. “So I can control your body, but not your mind.” His guess was that Ryuto’s consciousness had a certain amount of resistance to hypnosis, which surprised Inori because he’d never really taken Ryuto for a mentally strong person. Even more surprising, though, was how Ryuto still had yet to discern what kind of person Inori truly was.

“D-Dammit!”

Ryuto’s sudden outburst interrupted Inori’s thoughts. He realized that now was the time to decide how he should control Ryuto.

The fact was that they’d remain under his hypnosis until he decided to release them. This meant it was possible for him to limit their actions from now on. With that in mind, Inori turned to Aoi and gave her an order.

“Aoi, create your strongest barrier around this dungeon—one that fire can’t penetrate.”

Aoi nodded and did as instructed. After she was done, Inori inspected the barrier with Detect. Then, he turned to Tamaki.

“Hold this.” Inori handed her a specially made support item that boosted fire magic. Up until now, she’d only used training staffs, so her power using an actual staff with magic circuits embedded in it would likely be leagues above what she was used to. “Now test out a weak spell.”

Tamaki obeyed. Even though the spell was supposed to be weak, a huge ball of fire appeared in the palm of her hand.

“That works. Now use all of your power to set fire to the castle—enough to burn the entire thing to the ground, along with all the bodies inside it. Can you do that?”

Tamaki nodded.

“Good. Then burn it all down, with everything you’ve got.”

“What?!” Ryuto cried out in surprise.

In the meantime, however, Tamaki began forming a massive and very complicated magic circle. Completing it required much more time than the weak spell from before.

“St-Stop, Tamaki!” Ryuto was frantic.

But no matter how he tried, it all fell on deaf ears. Tamaki activated the spell without even a hint of hesitation. In the blink of an eye, the entire castle was engulfed in a brilliant blaze of red and blue flames, hot enough to turn even the stone floor red.

The flames licked at the walls, reducing wood to ash, melting glass, and destroying the magic circuits embedded throughout the castle. Even though the barrier that Aoi had created was supposed to protect them, they could still feel the heat from the conflagration.

“Wow… So this is the power of a hero’s cheat.” Inori was reacting not just to Tamaki, who had enough firepower to bring down an entire castle, but also to Aoi, who was able to create a barrier strong enough to withstand that onslaught, even without the use of a support item.

Inori surveyed the area with Omniscience and confirmed that the work was complete. Then he looked down at Tamaki, who’d collapsed. From what he could tell, she’d lost consciousness due to a severe case of mana depletion.

“Okay—time to get our lies straight,” Inori said to the two who were still conscious.

Aoi remained under hypnosis, so her eyes drooped as she looked at Inori. Ryuto, in contrast, was biting his lip and glaring at Inori.

“First, the chancellor and the knights executed a coup and killed the king and queen. After that, the knights were mobilized to secure the castle and to murder the servants and nobles who were inside. The three heroes were incapacitated by the knight captain and confined to the dungeons.” Nothing he had said so far contradicted the facts Ryuto was aware of. “After that, a meddlesome demon who had little to nothing to do with the coup infiltrated the castle. He ran into the knight captain by chance and tried

blackmailing her into accepting his marriage proposal. However, she flat-out refused him. Angered, the demon killed her and burned the entire castle to cinders."

Ryuto's eyes widened at Inori's statement. He was more surprised by the fact that someone had been able to kill the captain than by the demon's rampage. Even with his Divine Blessing, Ryuto hadn't stood a chance against her.

"So, after killing the captain, 'Humanity's Strongest,' the demon got full of himself and went down to the dungeon where the heroes were being held. He introduced himself by saying, 'Hello, I'm the new demon king.'" Inori walked towards one of the adamantite bars of the cell, grabbed it, and used Armament Craft to turn it into needles. When he finished, the bar made a sound like sand as it crumbled into dust.

"I'm the demon who called himself the demon king," said Inori, as the metal behind him crumbled, leaving a hole between the bars large enough for a person to fit through.

Ryuto's mouth hung open in disbelief. Initially, Inori had brought a key because he hadn't been sure that he could use Armament Craft on the adamantite, but it seemed that his concern had been unnecessary.

"Oh, right. And then the new demon king declared the following…ahem. 'Heroes, the biggest threat isn't the current demon king, but me.' After saying this, the demon king left. Thankfully, Aoi's barrier kept the heroes safe from any injury."

The only thing left was for Inori to address Tamaki's mana depletion. A day or two and she should be able to recover…or at least, that's what Inori wanted to believe. With that in mind, he approached Ryuto.

"Got it? Everything I said is 'the truth.' Most likely, the Maccad Empire will send their forces here to rescue you guys. When they come, be sure to tell them 'the truth.'"

Ryuto flicked a rebellious gaze in Inori's direction, but Inori simply gave him a cold look in return.

"There's a chance that the hypnosis will be dispelled sometime down the road. When that happens, you can say whatever you want. But…" Inori moved towards Ryuto and whispered in his ear. "Are you going to be the one to tell Tamaki that she torched all the knights in the castle?"

Ryuto froze.

"Tamaki might seem cheeky, but she's too nice when it comes to other people. Even if she was under my hypnosis when she did it, she'd still be the person who killed all those knights. She wouldn't have a choice but to shoulder that sin. Do you think she can handle that?"

Ryuto began to grind his teeth in anger.

"If you try to lie, it's not gonna work out for you. The Maccad Empire has an Artifact that's a lie detector. It'll see right through you if you're not telling the truth."

"Then why did you…"

“What I said was strictly ‘the truth,’” Inori said, with a slight smile. “I’ll think of all the other questions they might come at you with. When they do, be sure to only tell them the answers I give you.”

“Now, then…” Inori had finished manipulating Tamaki’s and Aoi’s memories and giving Ryuto his orders. A sigh escaped his mouth as he looked up at the ceiling of the dungeon. He noticed that the door of the dungeon was firmly closed, which meant that there had to be some kind of ventilation system. He looked at the magic circle engraved in the glove on his left hand and stored the circle in his Eye of Sigils.

“Okay—I’m gonna head out. Be sure to follow my orders.”

“Yes,” Aoi replied robotically.

“Damn it all…” Ryuto cursed, returning Inori’s gaze with one of bitterness.

Inori didn’t care at all, though. He teleported over to the vent, but just as he was about to leave, he turned around again. “Oh, right. Almost forgot. ‘Hear me, heroes. This is a declaration from the new demon king. Your greatest enemy is not the current demon king, but me.’”

Then, Inori’s body was enveloped by a yellow light. In the next moment, he had disappeared from the dungeon.

Afterwards, the sun never rose again on the Rising Sun Kingdom.

Epilogue

As the pale light of sunrise rose over the kingdom, so did dark orange flames and plumes of smoke. The intense conflagration cast a faint illumination over the area. Those who had risen early buzzed with shock and confusion at the sight of the castle in flames. The commotion reached all the way to the edge of the kingdom.

With flames that intense, everything inside the castle—from a single sheet of paper to a full human corpse—would be reduced to ashes. The investigative techniques of this world weren't particularly advanced, so even if several corpses or books went missing, they'd be none the wiser. From their point of view, all the evidence had been destroyed.

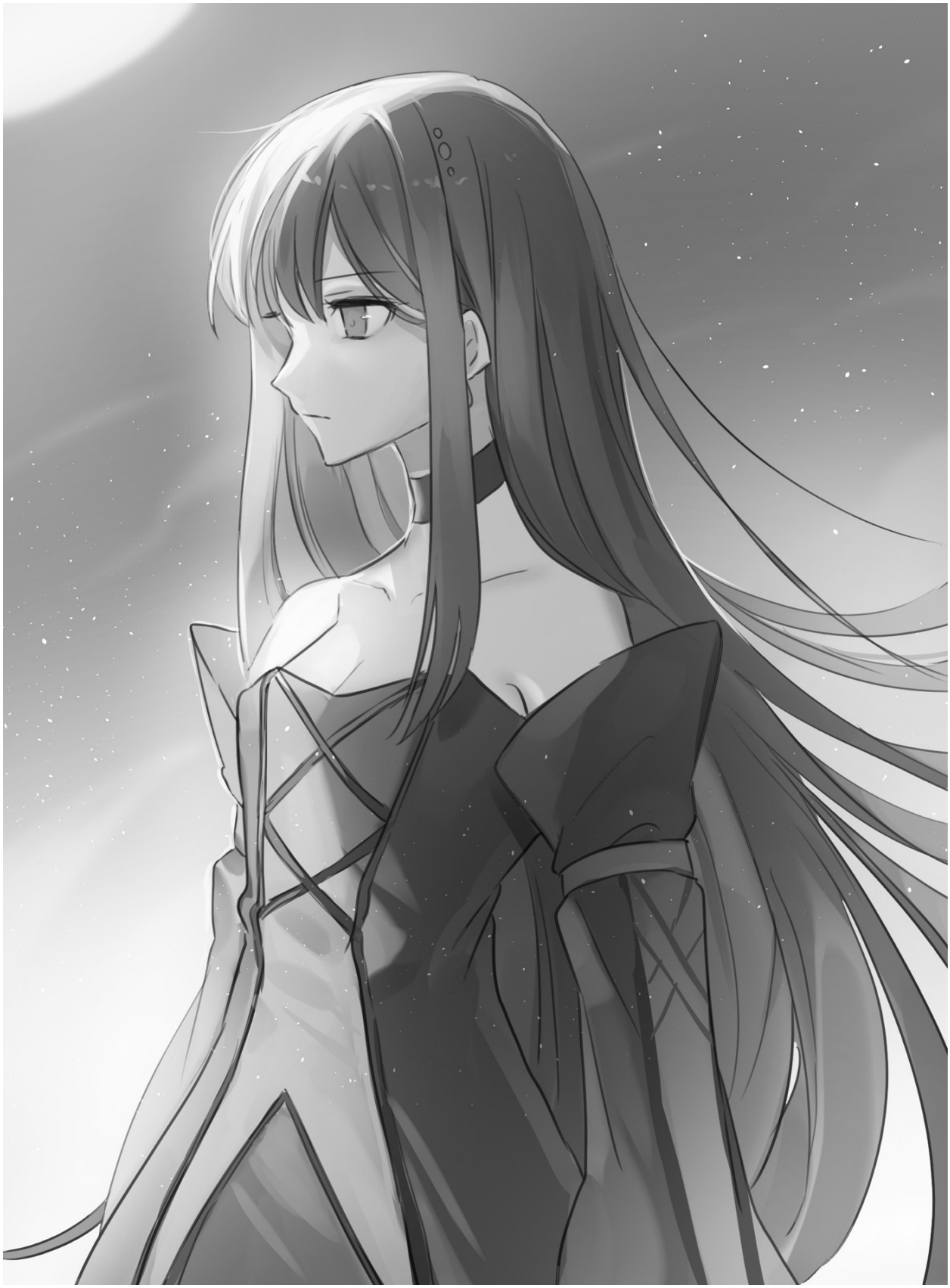
News of what had happened here would surely spread to the Maccad Empire, which would then prompt them to send forces to rescue the heroes. After that, they'd find Ryuto and the others and hear the "truth" from them. They'd learn to fear the new demon king who'd burned down the castle, merely for his own amusement. Plus, the individual who had been known as Inori Takafuji would be declared dead. Even if they asked about me, Ryuto would tell them as much, just as I'd instructed.

The Maccad Empire followed the path of the light goddess, which venerated the chief deity. The way their lie detector worked was that it didn't actually detect whether the person taking the test was lying or not. Rather, it simply verified whether the statements they made were factually true. Since this was something I'd learned from a book, there was no telling whether these assumptions were still valid. Either way, though, with that in mind, I made Ryuto remember the "truth" I'd told him. His story only differed from reality in that we'd glossed over a couple of details and tweaked some of the phrasing. There was no way that they'd think he was lying.

All that's left is to figure out what to do with her... I shifted my gaze to Ariya, who was looking up at the castle, her face illuminated by the flames. She'd changed more than I'd expected. There wasn't so much as a trace of her former princess look left.

Her bright brown hair had changed to a lustrous black, and her eyes were now a fiery crimson. She was no longer the boring-looking person she used to be. Now, she was a person who'd turn heads. She gave off the same vibes as someone cosplaying a traditional Japanese beauty. In other words, it looked unnatural on her.

Thanks to her red eyes and black hair, it wouldn't be easy to recognize her as the second princess. It'd be easier to pass unnoticed, but it kinda made me think. If her appearance had changed this much…was there a point in having killed everyone just to make it look like she had died too?



In the distance, there was the sound of something crumbling. Looking over, one of the castle spires had fallen apart. Most likely, the wood that supported it had caught fire, and thermal expansion had brought down the stone with it. *Tamaki can produce flames that strong? Yeesh.*

I glanced back at Ariya, who had her eyes shut. Was she praying? After a few moments of silence, her head snapped towards me. “Let’s go,” she said.

“You’re good?”

“I feel somewhat conflicted…but I’m finally free. There’s no reason for me to cling to the past.”

“Got it,” I answered shortly, before beginning to lead Ariya through the pitch-black forest. “Watch your step.”

“I’m fine. Ever since my transformation, I’ve been able to see well in the dark.”

“Is that right?”

Apparently, Ariya had gained some of my knowledge when I’d turned her into a vampire. Just as I gained Skills from the targets I sucked blood from, those I turned into vampires seemed to gain some of my vampiric abilities, my Skills, common knowledge from my world, and so on.

“Oh, right. You called yourself ‘free,’ but you serve me just like my thralls do. How’s that make you feel?” I posed this question to Ariya as we walked through the forest. I’d been here so often that it felt more like home to me than the castle did.

Truthfully, I didn’t really understand what it meant for her to “serve me.” Given that she’d gained my knowledge on top of what she already knew, she might’ve been more informed on this question than me.

“I much prefer this to being in the castle... However, I can’t say that I’m entirely free. I’m not able to do any harm to you, and I’m compelled to obey your every order.”

“How’s that different from being a thrall?”

“I possess my own will, and I have a method by which I can get out from under your thumb.”

A what now?

“Slaves can purchase their freedom, but you can’t. How do you intend to escape my control?”

“It’s simple. If I become stronger than you, then the chains that shackle me to you will be broken.”

Oh, interesting. By “chains,” she must mean my vampire authority. If her authority surpassed mine, then I wouldn’t be able to compel her to do things anymore. As I mulled this over, Ariya looked up at me from the bottom of the slope we were climbing.

“I want to be free. I’m not content with serving you, so…” Her eyes flashed red as she looked at me, issuing this challenge with a faint grin. “I will become stronger than you and claim my freedom.”

Is that even possible? Like, realistically? Sure, her Divine Blessing was Genius, so she could grow stronger than a normal person, but was there a single possibility of her beating me, with all of my cheats?

"Heh. Sure. Give it your best shot," I scoffed, enjoying the thought.

"I hope you don't come to regret those words."

Why would I? It wasn't so bad, having an underling who was just waiting for me to fall asleep so she could slit my throat...as long as she *stayed* an underling.

At that point, Ariya caught up to me, so I let our conversation come to an end there, and continued on through the forest. As we walked along in silence, I began remembering the last words Aegiana had uttered as I drank her blood.

"I was given the title of Humanity's Strongest, but it was a lie...or rather, a misunderstanding of sorts. There exists an individual whom I've challenged but couldn't defeat, no matter how many times I tried. My teacher. During the four years when I was lying low, my teacher took me in, but I never did learn his name. He may become your enemy one day, or perhaps you'll seek to make him your enemy on your own. Simply mention that you killed me, and I'm certain he will be happy to do battle with you."

Judging by the memories I had gotten from her, he was a perpetually hooded man who was thin but toned. For one who might've been the strongest human alive, he certainly seemed to live a lavish lifestyle. It seemed that he'd taught Aegiana how to use her mana to enact her Detect-like ability.

If she hadn't won a single time against him, even years ago, then there was no doubt that he was stronger than me. I was interested in fighting him, but it was definitely too early for that.

"Which country are we going to now?"

"Country?" I asked, pushing away the branches obstructing me. I'd always teleported here, so having to walk through all of this felt like a huge pain in the ass.

"Are we not fleeing this country?"

"Eventually, but I think we might as well wait out the chaos and confusion first."

The various territories of this country still had their own armed forces. There was no doubt they would either try to make a claim for the throne, or other countries would sweep in to try to absorb them. Either way, chaos was inevitable.

"Then where are we going?"

"We're already here."

"Huh?" Ariya made a sound of confusion. Meanwhile, I summoned Fenrir from my shadow.

"Hey, Fenrir. Looking pretty good for someone who was insta-killed by Aegiana."

It took a moment for Fenrir to reply. "What is thy command, masterrr?"

Apparently, he was bothered by what had happened in that battle. After becoming my thrall, he was pretty much an extension of myself. No matter how badly any of them were beaten up, I could share my HP with them and allow them to regenerate.

"Can you dispel the illusion just for Ariya?"

"Easily doooone."

"Good. Do it."

"Yes, my masterrrr." Fenrir ran off into the forest. I wasn't too sure what he was up to, but there was probably a switch or something in there.

"Huh? Wha—?!"

I was using my Eye of True Vision, so I couldn't really see the difference between the illusion and the real space. Ariya, however, could.

"What is this...?"

"Fenrir's home...and my training ground." *Maybe we should stay here for a bit? There are a few things I want to do before we head to places where other people live.* The first was that I wanted to give Fenrir and the other wolves more experience fighting actual people. Then, I wanted to assess Ariya's vampire powers and make sure she mastered them. I also wanted to train and get more fighting experience under my belt. At the same time, I could assess and hone all the new Skills I had gotten. *Speaking of which...what do my stats look like right now?*

Inori Takafuji / Demon (Vampire — Baron-Class) / Lv. 14
HP: 3782/3782(+100+865) / MP: 22037/22037(+1000+927)
STR: 4133(+100+753) / VIT: 3661(+100+639) / DEX: 3417(+100+756) /
AGI: 4325(+100+813) / INT: 5975(+200+691)
Unique Skills: [Growth Boost] [5x Exp Multiplier] [½ Required Exp] [Eye of True Sight] [Eye of Sigils] [Contempt for the Sun God] [Vampirism]
[Baron-Class Authority] [Skill Pilfer] [True Dark Magic] [Armament Craft] [Detect] [Level Up] [Skill Acquisition] [Monarch Caliber] [Martial Arts Master]
General Skills: [Swordsmanship Lv. 7] [Stealth Lv. 7] [Throwing Arts Lv. 8] [Dagger Arts Lv. 6] [Dropkick Lv. 10] [Swindler Lv. 7] [Trap Removal Lv. 4] [Flight Lv. 5] [Trapper Lv. 4] [Bite Lv. 10] [Leap Lv. 10] [Evasion Lv. 8] [Poise Lv. 7] [String Arts Lv. 6] [Archery Lv. 3] [Jo Mastery Lv. 1] [Hand-to-Hand Combat Lv. 2] [Bludgeoning Arts Lv. 1] [Shield Arts Lv. 4] [Katana Arts Lv. 1] [Spear Arts Lv. 4] [Marksman Lv. 1] [Fire Magic Lv. 1] [Water Magic Lv. 1] [Wind Magic Lv. 1] [Earth Magic Lv. 1] [Light Magic Lv. 1] [Dark Magic Lv. 1] [Mana Manipulation Lv. 1] [Armor Arts Lv. 1] [Stance Arts Lv. 1] [Assassination Arts Lv. 4] [Hidden Blade Lv. 1] [Cooking Lv. 3] [Cleaning Lv. 3] [Laundry Lv. 2] [Transportation Lv. 2] [Sewing Lv. 3] [Hospitality Lv. 2]

[Merchant Lv. 3] [Mental Math Lv. 2] [Memorization Lv. 3] [Nursing Lv. 2] [Strategist Lv. 2] [Penmanship Lv. 2] [Speed-writing Lv. 1] [Agriculture Lv. 1] [Parallel Thinking Lv. 2] [Speed-reading Lv. 1] [Sleight of Hand Lv. 1] [Drunken Rage Lv. 1] [Sexual Prowess Lv. 1] [Thought Acceleration Lv. 2] [Spatial Awareness Lv. 1] [Party Tricks Lv. 1] [Pen Spinning Lv. 1] [Tabletop Gaming Lv. 1] [Gambling Lv. 1] [Great Fortune Lv. 1] [Misfortune Lv. 1] [Bad Luck with Women Lv. 1] [Painter Lv. 1] [Musician Lv. 2] [Architect Lv. 3] [Singer Lv. 2] [Dancer Lv. 4] [Court Etiquette Lv. 2] [Poker Face Lv. 3] [Side-to-Side Hopping Lv. 1] [Blink Step Lv. 1] [Quickdraw Lv. 1] [Dual Wielding Lv. 1] [Bondage Lv. 1] [Flirting Lv. 1] [Wink Lv. 1] [Fake Laughing Lv. 1] [Self-control Lv. 1] [Fear Resistance Lv. 1] [Pain Resistance Lv. 1] [Poison Resistance Lv. 2] [Charm Resistance Lv. 1] [Heat Resistance Lv. 1] [Physical Resistance Lv. 1] [Cold Resistance Lv. 1]
Titles: Indomitable Soul, Involved Against Will, Ham Actor, Giant Killer, Scum of the Earth, Skill Collector, Assassin, Annihilator, Ruthless

I have too many Skills. It's gonna take me a good amount of time to go through all of them, so I'll save my comments for later. I *will* say, though, that even after killing all those people, my level had only gone up by one. Most likely, that had something to do with their use of magic tools.

Put simply, without magic armor, even Aegiana was probably no stronger than a Kecho. I might as well have killed a castle full of Kechos. *Killing humans is such a waste of time.*

For the time being, I decided to stay in this dense forest while figuring out all my Skills. It wouldn't be as glamorous as living in the castle, but I was sure that the former princess wouldn't mind paying a price like this for her freedom. Besides, I wanted her to accept her current reality as quickly as possible.

◇

Bitrei opened his eyes to a white space.

Where... Where am I? He looked around at the fantastical sight before him. His instincts told him that he was neither dreaming, nor trapped in an illusion. *I remember the moment of my death...*

He searched his memories, but couldn't recall how he'd ended up here. As far as he could guess, he'd simply appeared—suddenly finding himself here in this white space that seemed to stretch on endlessly. However, he then sensed a cluster of muddy darkness, quite different from the purity of the space around him. He felt as if his very heart were being clenched tight.

Suddenly, he heard a creaking sound from behind him. It was the same unnerving sound of rusty gears turning. Wanting to know the origin of the sound, Bitrei turned around. Waiting there was a most unusual figure.

Creaaak. Creaaak.

At first glance, it appeared to be a tree, or perhaps a broken thousand-armed Kannon statue. It wore a plain, inhuman, and expressionless mask, which had an uncountable number of thin, tubelike growths sprouting from it. The growths split at certain points like the nodes of bamboo and made cracking sounds as they bent. At their tips, there were five further thin and fingerlike growths that each resembled an arm. They moved restlessly, all the while making creaking sounds. The white mask in the center of it all faced downwards, but barely even moved. Sometimes it would snap to the side as if it had remembered something. Its gaze focused on its hands. Its thin, bug-like arms held a pen dexterously as they wrote upon a dirty piece of light-brown paper.

"AaAaA..." A sound almost like a moan gurgled out of the creature.

Its existence was absolute. In the presence of this supreme being, Bitrei's thoughts froze over. All at once, it stopped writing and turned its white mask to Bitrei.

"BiTrei... YoU MuST aToNe fOr YoUr SinS..."

"Eek!"

"YoU MaY hAvE OnLy sLaiN One. HoWeVEr, YoUr ScHeME KiLLeD TwO tHoUsaNd FiVE HuNdReD aNd NiNetEEn PeoPle... FuRthErMorE, it diD nOt coNtRibUte to thE AdVanCemEnt of MaNkInd. ThErEfoRe..." The many arms began to move furiously, fusing and splitting over and over again before forming themselves into the shape of a door. "YoU wIll Go tO HeLL anD bE cLeANsEd fOr tWo tHoUsaNd FiVE HuNdRed aNd NiNetEEn YeArS."

"N-No!" Bitrei screamed as countless thin arms seized him, lifting him off the ground. The shabby door slowly opened, and more insect-like arms reached out to Bitrei from within.

"Do NoT StrUggLe... YoU ShAll fight in oUr gOd'S naMe. Be GraTeFul..."

"God... God?!" At this point, Bitrei finally regained his sense of self. "When has God ever saved his people? All he does is observe from his place in the heavens. That's all he is—a watcher! I am a descendant of the witch! She was the one who created our country and saved our ancestors! If I'm being punished for my affiliation with her, I shall gladly accept it. However, I refuse to be judged by your god!"

"YoU... YoU wOuLd moCk oUr GoD...? ScUm..."

The hands holding Bitrei stopped, then slammed him into the ground.

"KnOw YoUr PlAcE, wReTcH! PrOstrAte yourself! PrAy fOr FoRgivEneSS, eVeN thOugh yOu WiLL nEveR Be GraNteD it!"

The arms slammed Bitrei against the ground over and over again, until his face had become something ghastly and unrecognizable. The once white ground had turned a brilliant shade of red.

"ScReAm! BeG! Go On aNd—"

"He's lost consciousness."

At the sound of this voice ringing out from a corner of the space, the arms stilled.

“M-My LOrD! Wh-WhY haVe yOu cOme HeRe...?”

“More importantly, just throw him through the door already. And take ten years or so off his sentence. You seriously have a thing for adding more punishment than necessary.”

“Y-YeS, mY LoRd.” The arms flung Bitrei through the door as they had been ordered.

As for this so-called “lord,” she had the appearance of a young girl. “You are always so quick to lose your temper,” she said through a sigh.

“B-BuT—”

“Save your excuses.” She turned around, and her silver hair spun with her.

The white mask looked to the ground, but though it was repentant, it remained expressionless.

“HoW MaY I SeRve YoU?”

“There’s a distortion in the world,” said the girl bitterly.

“ThE wOrld tHaT maN cAmE frOm?”

“They hail from the Abundant World. We are familiar with all the factors in their world. However...this distortion is different.”

The creaking sounds came to a stop.

“There are factors from different worlds in that specific world, and I believe that to be the source of the distortion. The Divine Blessings we’ve bestowed upon heroes seem to have multiple errors in them. In order to investigate, I was thinking of taking a look at Hell. Is that all right?”

“I uNdeRsTanD. I’Ve No ReAsoN tO ReFusE. PlEaSe gO aHeaD.”

“My thanks.”

The countless arms layered on top of one another, creating a hole through which the god put her small body before walking away.

As she did so, she thought, To restore balance to the world, I must discover and eliminate the source of the distortion.

◇

“So we’re going to train here?” Ariya asked, sitting in the shade of a large tree as she petted Fenrir, who’d shrunk down to the size of a large human.

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“By the way... What’s with this outfit you gave me?”

“You escaped in that dress, right? But training in it would be hard, so I made it into armor.”

“You ‘made it into armor’? I don’t understand what you mean at all.”

I didn’t have any women’s clothing on hand, so the obvious solution was to change her current clothes into armor. Specifically, I’d used Armament Craft to shadow-fortify it while removing any parts that restricted movement, and voila—she had a sort of dress armor.

“So what exactly am I supposed to do?”

“Get used to your new body, for starters. We’ll talk again after that.”

Ariya looked down at herself.

Well, she’s a genius, so it should only be a matter of time before she’s used to it.

“After we conclude training, where will we go?”

“Hm… I haven’t really thought about it, but maybe to a country that hasn’t summoned heroes yet.”

“Huh?”

“Hm?” Had I said something weird? It would be incredibly annoying to run into heroes, so it was only logical that we’d want to avoid them.

“There’s no country that *hasn’t* summoned heroes.”

“Huh?” Given how the chancellor had bitched about the kingdom summoning heroes, I’d thought there’d be other countries that hadn’t. “Okay, wait. Hold up. How many human countries are there?”

“Twelve in total.”

“Total?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a lot.”

“The more countries, the more heroes.”

So if there are twelve countries and each one summons three heroes, that means there are thirty-six heroes. Hm, how do I put this…? This is definitely a case of being oversummoned.

Short Story: I Tried Drawing on the Knight Captain’s Face

“Sorry for disturbing you during a lesson… Second Princess?”

Aegiana’s face filled with confusion. She had opened the door to the classroom expecting a class to be taking place, but the second princess was instead sitting on a chair in the corner, reading a book.

“Ae-Aegiana?! U-Uh, th-this isn’t what it looks like.” The second princess quickly tried to hide the book.

“You don’t have to pretend,” Aegiana said through a sigh. “I already know *he’s* the reason behind your actions.” She pointed at Inori, who was facedown on his desk and boldly sleeping.

“Yes… He is always sleeping, so I’ve been slacking a little.”

“Such a foolish decision when you’re making the effort to educate him. He deserves to die a thousand deaths.”

“H-Hold on, Aegiana! O-Oh, did you need me for something?”

“Yes. The king would like to speak to you about your little ‘field trip’ the other day.”

“Oh… He found out.”

“Indeed. You cannot fool me.”

“Do you think he’ll forgive me if I come clean?”

The other day, she’d snuck out of the castle with Inori and Nala. Aegiana had found out about their plans while they were forming them. Since she’d informed the king about it beforehand, they had been able to go shopping without incident.

The second princess worried about how she would explain herself. As she racked her brain, Aegiana began digging through various items in the room as if searching for something.

“Um, Aegiana? What are you doing?”

“If I remember correctly, this room has a brush and paint… Ah, there they are.” She returned with a brush used for painting and black ink. One only needed to produce a little water with magic and let it dissolve into the ink.

“Let us begin.”

“Aegiana?!” the second princess exclaimed as Aegiana leaned over and began drawing on Inori’s face.

“This is what his rudeness gets him.”

“I understand, but for what it’s worth, Inori scores highly on his tests, and he seems to understand the contents of my lessons…”

“Even so, it doesn’t change that he is being rude.” She continued drawing a beautiful rose on his forehead. “You aren’t used to teaching, so you put a lot of effort into your preparation. Yet here he is, disrespecting

your efforts.” Her movements did not cease for even a second. This time, she drew a Kecho on his right cheek.

“Well…”

“You’re too kind to him. No matter how tough you are on him, he won’t care or stand for it. Holding your anger back against such a person is meaningless.” She continued drawing an elegant treant on his left cheek.

“Aegiana… You’re… You’re very good at drawing.” The second princess trembled as she continued staring at the ground.

“Second Princess. I have something to tell you. Please temper your surprise.”

“Wh-What is it?”

Aegiana began tracing the brush along the edge of Inori’s face to make a circle.

“If I do this, the drawing becomes a map of the kingdom’s specialty goods.”

“Pfft!” Realizing that she’d slipped up, the second princess quickly covered her mouth. Then she hunched over, clutching her stomach as well.

“The nose represents the towering Mount Kachira at the center of it all —”

“Ae-Aegiana, p-please stop!” the princess wheezed.

“Understood.” Aegiana pulled the brush away to wash it, but before she could, she noticed something and paused. “At least, in the end, I…”

“Aegiana? Did you say something?”

“Nothing. I’m glad to have been able to see your smile, after all this time. I will take my leave now, Second Princess.”

“Oh, how embarrassing. Thank you for coming. I will speak with His Majesty soon.”

◇

Phew—I love napping the whole class away. I let out a yawn and looked around the classroom. “Huh? Where’s Sensei?” Usually she stayed in the room until I woke up, but maybe something had come up. *Whatever. Time to leave.*

I left the classroom and walked down the hallway. I must’ve left at the exact time that the heroes’ classes ended because as I rounded the corner, I ran into Ryuto.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Ino…” At once, he turned away from me.

Hm? Is there something on my face? “What’s up, Ryuto?”

“Mm.”

Then Aoi and Tamaki appeared from around the corner, just in time to see Ryuto bent over and shaking. Aoi looked at me and began to speak, but then…

“Hello, Ino— Pfft!” She made a sound like a balloon that had lost its air, bending over and clutching her belly. *Huh. Stomachache, maybe?*

“What are you two doin— Pfft!” Tamaki let out a similarly strange sound and began laughing.

“Is there something on my face or something? There is, isn’t there?”

“Inori, u-uh...” By this point, Ryuto had mostly recovered. Still red in the face, he addressed me. “Drawing what you learned in class on your face probably won’t help you with studying.”

“Pfft!”

“Ryuto, st-stop! Aha ha ha ha!”

They were mocking me, completely and utterly. At last, I used Omniscience to see my face. Someone had drawn on it. Plus, for some random reason, the quality of the art was rather good. How kind. The perpetrator had even signed their own name. *Aegiana Itze.*

Most likely, the captain had visited while I was sleeping and drawn on my face. *I won’t stand for this. It’s time for revenge.* However, there was no way I could get revenge on her by myself. She was too powerful. I needed some allies.

“Aren’t they mean, Nala?” I had just explained everything that had happened with Ryuto and the others. “I told them how I wanted to get back at the captain. Then I asked them to join me, but can you guess what they said? ‘You got what you deserved,’ ‘You got your just deserts,’ and ‘Apologize to the princess.’ Awful, right?”

“You certainly got what you deserved. You got your just deserts. You should apologize to the princess.”

I see how it is, Maid A. You’re my enemy too. By now, I’d washed the art off my face. Yes, the paint was water-based, so the prank wasn’t too mean, but it was the principle of the thing.

“I want revenge, Nala! Innocent people shouldn’t endure unjust crimes! It’s time to rebel! We will tear down the tyrannous captain and—”

“Sit.”

“Huh?”

“Kneel on the floor. Now.”

After that, she lectured me. I had no clue why this world had the same cultural norms as Japan in this respect, but maybe that had come from the first heroes. Was that really something to pass down through the generations, though? At any rate, Nala was mad that I’d brushed off all of Sensei’s hard work to sleep.

But it wasn’t my fault I was a vampire! It was in my blood. In my very DNA. *Do you want me to die or something? If I’m hungry, I gotta eat. If I’m sleepy, I gotta sleep.* This was the natural order of things.

“By the way, Nala, would you be interested in helping me as Maid A?”

“No. Go ask someone else. And what does ‘Maid A’ mean, anyway?”

Someone else? But who? I wasn’t very friendly with the people here. Aside from this one maid and the heroes, I only really knew the king, the

queen, and...

"So, I want *you* to help me, Sensei—Your Highness."

"You know, I have to wonder sometimes... Are you stupid?"

I hadn't really expected her to diss me.

"But who else am I supposed to ask?"

"It's weird to ask me in the first place. Aegiana punished you for sleeping in *my* class."

Don't sweat the small stuff. Let's talk strategy. For my revenge, I'd decided not to use any of my cheat abilities. It'd be beyond ridiculous if I exposed myself over something as stupid and petty as this.

"Now then, we know that she is a very skilled fighter. There's no way we win in a head-on attack. We need to be crafty."

"So you really expect me to assist you?"

"My first instinct is to use the same method that she did—target her while she's asleep."

"Setting aside your phrasing... Isn't it your own fault that you fell asleep?"

Would you mind keeping your comments to yourself?

"At any rate, pulling this off at night will be difficult. She patrols the castle at night and barely sleeps. Even if you are able to infiltrate her room while she's sleeping, she would wake at once and, in the worst-case scenario, probably kill you."

What is she, a hit man? I discarded my plan at once. I wasn't about to die for this. This meant my only option was to go after her during a natural interaction in the day.

"During the confusion of training, I'll go after her with a brush."

"What happened to drawing on her face? It sounds like your goal is simply to get paint on her."

That would be enough to put my mind at ease.

"However, I think you'll find that difficult as well. She must oversee the training of the three heroes at the same time."

Hm? Three? What about me?

"Plus, since there's a chance that someone might attack during training, she must have her guard up considerably. It would probably be best if you tried to go after her when she's less guarded."

"I see... But is she ever unguarded?"

"Aegiana likes baths."

"Wow, didn't see that coming. What an archetype."

"Archetype?"

"Don't worry about it." This could be a great source of gap moe. It'd be even better if she had stuffed animals on her bed. "So you're saying that I should go after her when she's taking a bath?" *She'd be defenseless without her weapons, and she'd let her guard down. This is the best time to... Wait, hang on a moment.* "Uh, wouldn't I die? Like, socially?"

“Oh, so you realized that on your own.”

A friggin’ trap?! That was fine, though. I wanted to avoid the bath anyway, since it had mirrors. Regarding the information about her liking baths…I’d need to confirm that later with Omniscience. But I’d only be confirming the veracity of Sensei’s claim, that’s all. I swear.

“Okay, so the bath’s out. Do you have any other information or rumors about the captain, Second Princess? I’ll give you three silver pieces for it.”

“What do you take me for? At any rate, I’m not sure I’ve heard any rumors…”

“How about rumors about her having stuffed animals on her bed or something?”

“Never, but also, how would that help your plans?”

It looks like her gap moe stops at baths.

“Hm, let me think… A time when she lets her guard down… Information about Aegiana… Wait, why am I thinking so hard about something this ridiculous?”

Oh, now you realize.

“Besides, why are you so upset? I’d thought you were the type of person who wouldn’t care if their face was drawn on.”

Well, even I have my pride, no matter how paltry it might be. True, I was the type of person to throw away any pride I had in times of emergencies, but this was different.

“I’m not bothered by her drawing on my face. Even if she wrote ‘meat’ on my forehead, I wouldn’t bat an eye. But…” There was something else I absolutely couldn’t forgive. I clenched my fists, and they began to shake.

“‘Meat’?” Sensei questioned, tilting her head.

“I can’t forgive her for turning me into the canvas of a high-quality drawing and a joke.”

“Huh…?”

“She delivered the entire punch line herself. I couldn’t do anything about it. And I wasn’t aware of it happening at any point. There was no possible counterplay. The only thing I could do was stand there and be a laughingstock.”

It didn’t have to be *my* face that she’d drawn on. I might as well have been a scarecrow. The joke hadn’t been my idea either. Despite that, everyone was laughing at me. I couldn’t forgive that. I wanted to be the one making the jokes.

“I do not understand your reasoning whatsoever… However, I do know now that you are an idiot.” Surprisingly, my passionate speech had not moved Sensei in the slightest. “That being said, I remembered something that may be of use to you. Today I noticed that Aegiana is a skilled artist. She seemed less guarded when she was drawing on your face. It’s possible that it’s her hobby.”

“I don’t like how the source of this information is my face, but okay. I’ll use this to plan my next moves.”

“I’ve never seen her draw before, though.”

“I just need to create that opportunity. I’ll get the canvas ready for her.” I pointed to my face.

Sensei made an exasperated expression.

“I’m gonna fall asleep during your class again, and she’ll draw on me. Can you make up a reason and call her to class?”

“You really expect me to assist you, huh...? Even though Aegiana punished you for my sake?”

Though she was saying that, I had a feeling that she’d help me anyway. *I love that part of you, Sensei.*

“I call this plan ‘Punk’d: I try drawing on the captain’s face, gone wild!’ Let’s do this!”

“What’s with that name?!”

Aw, come on, that’s no way to get hyped. Come on, cheer with me!

The next day, I lay on my desk and fell asleep...or at least, pretended to. Sensei was reading as usual. The captain should have been arriving at any minute. I heard footsteps in the corridor. *There she is.*

“Pardon my intrusion, Second Princess. It’s me, Aegiana.”

“Sorry to have you come when you’re so busy.”

“Think nothing of it. I will come whenever you call for me. What do you need from me?”

“I have a question about the birthday party...”

“Oh, in that case...”

They began to converse. It seemed that Aegiana still hadn’t caught on that this was all part of my plan.

When the conversation died down a little, Aegiana looked over at me. “He’s *still* sleeping? Dear lord...” I sensed that she was approaching me, then I felt the tickling sensation of brush hairs on my face.

No, not yet. Steady... Steady...

“You really are good at drawing, Aegiana.”

“Heh. I used to draw a lot in the past.”

She sounds nice and relaxed. Her brush strokes began to pick up. *Good. Get more engrossed in drawing. Okay... Now!* I bent my fingers in her blind spot and activated my trap.

“Hm?!” She reacted to my trap, but it was too late. As soon as she’d failed to notice its activation, I’d won.

Trapper may have been sealed during the day, but I was still able to put my experience to use. Something flew over from behind me—a bucket filled with black ink. It was on a direct collision path for all of us, and I didn’t care if I was caught up in the splatter. *Let’s die together, Captain!*

“What happened to drawing...?” I heard the second princess mumbling something, but I didn’t care.

“Foolish!”

Dammit. With her light body, the captain had dodged the wide spray of the ink. Not even a single drop landed on her. In contrast, I was drenched in black ink.

"That's fine!" I'd accounted for her dodging my first attack. Now my body was essentially a wet brush. All I had to do was touch her, and I'd win!

"Weren't you supposed to be drawing?"

Shut up, Sensei! This doesn't end until I'm satisfied!

"I see... I've read your intentions, Inori."

"How did you know, Aegiana?"

Shut up, Sensei!

"This is your revenge... I've been thinking about battling you at full strength. You seem as if you've become stronger recently. Now, come! Try and dirty me!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!"

I began attacking her with more brushes, but she didn't draw her sword. In other words, she was declaring that she didn't need it to fight me. But she was underestimating me. She dodged my first brush thrust—*she's fast!*—but I could still track her! I pointed my left hand in the direction in which she had evaded. I didn't need to put any force behind it—all I needed to do was touch her. But she even dodged that.

"Is that all you've got?"

"I'm just getting started."

What a weak taunt, but I'll play your game!

"You two are surprisingly quite similar."

Shut up, bystander! Dammit, her physical abilities are too high. My win condition was to hit her. For her, it was to leave her sword sheathed. But it didn't feel as though she was fighting with a handicap. If I wanted to employ a surprise plan, I needed my Skills, but I couldn't use them. I didn't have many cards in my hand. I needed to somehow create an opening.

"How about this?!" I moved my hand in an arc, making drops of ink fly forward in a semicircle. I knew they wouldn't connect, but that's exactly what I wanted. As she dodged, I threw my brush at her. If she dodged, she'd get hit by the ink I'd thrown. But if she didn't, she'd get hit by the brush. *Your move.*

"You still haven't learned!"

Dammit! She slipped between the two by the smallest of margins. *How can she move so precisely?* This spelled the end of that strategy. I needed to move to the next—

Splat.

"Ah." Both of our mouths fell open in surprise.

The brush that she'd dodged had instead hit the person who'd gotten bored and returned to reading—the second princess. Now, Her Highness's left cheek had a splotch of black ink on it. I began to panic. The captain's face grew pale. As for Sensei, she began to tremble with anger.

"You two..."

“Yes?” the both of us responded.

“Kneel on the floor.”

“Huh?” the two of us questioned.

“*Now*.”

She made us kneel while she gave us a lecture. A very long lecture. One that lasted about an hour.

“Um, Sensei, the ink on my body’s pretty much dried up. May I go wash —”

“No.”

“Second Princess, I have patrol duties to attend to. May I—”

“No.”

Both our requests were rejected. In the end, we were lectured until the sun set. *Um, I’m hungry. Can I... No? Oh, okay.* That request was rejected too.

Oversummoned, Overpowered, and Over It! Volume 1
End

Commentary Disguised as an Afterword

Saitosa

You must be wondering what kind of person the author of this novel, Saitosa, is. He is a monster in the shape of two hands. They both form the body of one monster, but you have to take them both out at the same time or else he'll revive.

Just kidding—he's human. But I've seen these rumors flying around. It's unclear how they started, though. His study isn't really open to the public, but I was given very special permission to enter. His bookshelves are filled with manga. You can count on one hand how many classic literature novels he has, and they're all caked in dust, tucked away in a corner of his room.

It's hard to know exactly what inspired him to begin writing. The more one explores the roots of this, the more it feels like grasping at clouds or like having a pointless debate. But I know that his humanity and his life have had no effect on his writing style. If they had, though, you'd read this volume and then end up thinking he was an insane pervert.

This is his debut piece, and he joins the ranks of people who write the so-called "isekai" genre. At the same time, he's writing something that's almost the antithesis of that. However, I'd like to think of it as him writing something that's not so much the antithesis of that genre as staying true to the essence of it.

[ADDITIONAL TEXT OMITTED HERE]

So, we know how the book was written, but what is the main theme? Saitosa mentioned that he thought of this book as a sort of experiment, but I don't think that's the theme, of course. The most unique thing about this book is its protagonist's strong personality. I believe that Saitosa is hiding what he really wants to say—the theme of the book—in that.

[ADDITIONAL TEXT OMITTED HERE]

It's hard to say how the manga and anime got published simultaneously. He doesn't talk about it, so it's not certain, but apparently, Saitosa was approached by a different publisher about this series. Looking him up revealed that he'd entered a lot of different contests and that he was putting in a lot of effort.

Allow me to share an anecdote. When he got his first call from a publisher, he was at a fast-food restaurant, in the middle of drinking a Coke. He was so surprised that the Coke went up his nose. This is only further confirmed by the fact that Saitosa absolutely loves Coke.

The first volume of *Oversummoned, Overpowered, and Over It!* ends here, but the tale doesn't. The protagonists will become adventurers in a certain city, and meet a certain annoying-looking person and a certain protagonist's plaything. There's still much to look forward to!

Aoi Isoya
16 / Female / Height: 155cm
Always with Ryuto despite only befriending him in high school. Though not very talkative or expressive, she's a very kind person.
Tamaki Karasawa
17 / Female / Height: 159cm
Childhood friend of Ryuto who essentially goes wherever he does...the lucky bastard. She acts cold, but she's a big softie—a bona fide tsundere.
Ryuto Shinzaki
17 / Male / Height: 172cm
One of the heroes summoned to the Rising Sun Kingdom. He's a kind person who cares about his friends and anyone he sees suffering.
Inori Takafuji
17 / Male / Height: 179cm
The least protagonist-like protagonist of this story.
Oversummoned, Overpowered, AND OVER IT!

Ariya

18 / Female / Height: 161cm

The second princess of the Rising Sun Kingdom. She is bound to her position, which makes it difficult for her to express her emotions. Many call her the "puppet princess," but is that really

Amanda

12 / Female / Height: 147cm

The first princess of the Rising Sun Kingdom. She has a high-and-mighty attitude, and her catchphrase is "You should be grateful!"

Aegiana Itze

27 / Female / Height: 171cm

The knight captain of the Rising Sun Kingdom. She is just as hard on herself as she is on others. She'll be as cutthroat as needed to achieve her goals, but also has a gentle side.

Bonus Short Story

The Rising Sun Kingdom's Tournament of Heroes

"We will now hold a tournament to evaluate your skills in real combat." This was the declaration the captain made right before training began.

It was a beautiful, sunny day—perfect for training, but horrible for vampires. Thanks to a splitting headache, I rather doubted what my ears were telling me. I wanted to suck it up and ask a question, but Ryuto beat me to the punch.

"By 'real combat,' do you mean we'll use real weapons too?" Ryuto asked, raising his hand.

"No. You will fight in mock battles using training weapons. But you don't have to hold back. You can go all out."

"Aren't you worried about us getting hurt?"

"I can heal you. Not a problem."

Ah, the logic of a meathead.

"I have another question. What format will you be using for this tournament?"

"You will each draw a number between one and four. First, numbers one and two will do battle, and then numbers three and four. The winners move on to the next round, while the losers fight for third place. The winners will fight for first place."

Huh? Four numbers? Four people? Ha ha... No way. Right?

"Is there an incentive for us to do better?"

"I was thinking your performance could have an effect on your grades, but perhaps I should come up with a more tangible reward..."

Ryuto and the captain had held an entire conversation, but I still didn't think they had discussed one of the most important points. Who cared about what happened to the winner? What about the loser? *Won't somebody please think about the loser?* I wanted to pray, but I knew that what I needed wasn't divine intervention. It was to take action myself.

"Excuse me," I said, butting into their conversation. "Am I included in this tournament?"

"Yes, obviously."

Not so obvious to me.

"Have you considered the possibility that if I get hurt, I might die?"

"Hm? I can heal you. Not a problem."

There is a problem, meathead! Your healing magic won't do shit if I'm dead, Miss Muscles-for-Brains! Healing magic can't resurrect someone, you goddamn gorilla! However, at this point Aegiana simply returned to the topic of the winner's reward, making it clear she was moving on. But who gives a shit about the reward?! Woo-hoo, you get a feast or whatever. I couldn't care less. I'd rather eat tissues with aloe than their garlic-loaded food. It'd be better for my skin too.

Ryuto was looking at me with a sympathetic smile, as if to say, “Poor Inori. Not again.” *I’m gonna bite your face off.* Don’t “poor Inori” me! Did he even know what it was like to have more than half of your usual strength vanish during daytime? Seriously, I was five times weaker than I was at night!

“I have an idea for a reward.” With a broad smile on her face, the first princess popped up out of nowhere. Apparently, she’d got the gist of the tournament and thought it sounded like a blast.

The second princess (Sensei) was standing next to her, but I guess it wasn’t too weird for her to be here too since she was already a regular visitor. Also, how long was this discussion about the reward going to drag on? Suddenly I began to understand how meetings could go on forever without anything actually being decided.

“It’s a most magnificent reward!” said the first princess, quickly following up with her usual catchphrase, “You should be grateful!” *Just spit it out already!* “I will allow the winner to k-kiss me.” *Uh…hard pass. Okay, we’re done here.*

Her face was bright red, but she was still standing proudly with her left hand on her hip, pointing at her cheek with her right. Behold—the tsundere princess, first of her name. It was so obvious she was after Ryuto’s lips. The tournament was a good chance for her because it was hard to imagine anyone else could beat him. His combat sense was much higher than ours, after all.

There was no point in her trying to hide it at this point either. It was as clear as day. In a monarchy, you’d almost *never* be in a position to kiss a princess, making this reward incredibly valuable…to everyone but me. I couldn’t give two shits about the reward—I had more pressing things on my mind.

“May I add something?” the second princess asked.

“Go ahead, Your Highness.”

“Due to the great value of the reward, the bouts may get out of hand.” *Is she being sarcastic? Are we about to see a sister showdown? That’d be great, because it’d put a stop to this stupid tournament.* “In order to avoid any unfortunate accidents, how about we allow the heroes to yield in battle?”

God is real. I almost wanted to get on my knees and pray. That’s how divine Sensei looked in my eyes. And since this was a request from the second princess, the captain found it hard to turn her down.

“Understood. In that case, if one of the combatants yields, the battle must immediately cease.”

Hell yeah! I can already hear the victory bells. As soon as the first match started, I’d yield. I’d be the first one out. They wouldn’t even have a chance to chant a spell, draw a bow, or unsheathe a sword. I’d be out.

“By the way, Inori, if you yield right when the battle begins, I will double your training tomorrow.”

God is dead.

We drew our numbers. In order from one to four, it was Ryuto, Aoi, me, Tamaki. I was screwed. Out of everyone, I just *had* to be paired up with Tamaki. Ryuto would've probably gone easy on me, while Aoi had a defensive Divine Blessing and cloth-wrapped arrows that wouldn't hurt. At worst, they'd maybe break a bone.

However, Tamaki was different. She didn't know the meaning of holding back. I *knew* she'd come at me with everything she had, and what she had was enough to end my life and send me on a brand new isekai journey.

"Aoi... I'm not gonna hold anything back."

"I won't lose!"

The match between Ryuto and Aoi greatly resembled one that you'd see in a classic sports manga. I wasn't interested in the least, though. I had bigger worries—namely, Tamaki, the god of death.

"Inori... I'm not gonna hold anything back."

"Actually, common sense says you should. Do you know what happens if you hit a frog with everything you got?"

"Huh? The only thing that breaks is the rock under it, right? Ryuto told me all about that."

Yeah—in manga, maybe!

"Uh, pardon me for asking, Ryuto, but just what have you been teaching these girls?" I asked.

"Wh-What do you mean, Inori?"

"Your girl over here doesn't seem to understand the difference between fiction and reality."

"Huh? What's that now?"

"Huh? Do your ears conveniently block out things they don't want to hear? I'm saying you've taught them poorl— Owowowowow!" *My ear! Ow!*

"Cease your idle chatter. We'll be starting the first fight now," the captain said, tugging on my ear to pull me to the spectator area where Tamaki, Sensei, and the first princess were seated. "Watch and perhaps learn a thing or two." She tossed me inside, fortunately deciding to let go of my ear. *Thank god. Another ten seconds and I would've become part elf.*

The spectator space had a roof over it, blocking the rays of the sun. In the shade, I was finally able to clear my head. There were also a lot of chairs, so I had my pick. Usually these were occupied by the War Maiden Battalion who helped out with our training, but right now, it was for an audience. With the first princess Sensei and Tamaki here, it was a very woman-dominated space. I felt like I was in a girls-only car on a train—not very comfortable. That being said, it would have been worse to sit off by myself somewhere. We live in a society, and it sucks.

"Inori, why don't you sit over here?" Sensei called out to me, tapping the seat next to her. She wasn't sitting with her sister or Tamaki, but had instead chosen a seat a little apart from them. *Thank you!*

“If you insist.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“As much as I’d like to ask what your definition of ‘okay’ is, if we’re talking about my match, the answer is no.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Do I *look* like I do?”

“You did in the dungeon.”

“I was able to prepare for that, though. Maybe if someone…I don’t know, maybe *you*…had leaked the fact that we’d be holding a tournament today, I could’ve come up with something.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know about it either…”

That’s surprising, considering that your tsundere sister probably did. “Are they bullying you?”

“No… I don’t think so. Probably not…” She sounded less and less sure with each word. Given that we were in public, it was probably hard for her to respond to me the way she usually would, with a dark joke or a harsh comment. As for me, my guess was that the first princess had forced the captain to hold this tournament. It’d explain why this whole thing was so out of the blue.

“Proceed to your respective starting lines,” the vice captain Maria instructed. Apparently she would be the referee for our matches.

The rules were simple: if you landed an attack that would’ve been fatal using a real weapon, you won. Pretty dangerous if you ask me—though it didn’t account for beings who wouldn’t die from taking such a blow.

Right now, there were two people in the arena. They were standing a surprising distance from one another, which most likely had to do with the fact that one of them was a bow user and the other a swordsman. Starting at a distance meant that she wouldn’t immediately be within range of his blade. Aoi had a pretty big advantage because, even if Ryuto could use magic, she was able to use both bows and barriers.

In general, bows were probably the strongest weapon, followed by spears, swords, and then fists. It was like living in a video game with a weapon triangle. *Huh? What about me, you ask? I’m using a dagger. What about it?* Daggers lay somewhere between swords and fists in terms of strength. I could throw them, but I didn’t have a lot of them on hand, so the minute I lost one it was over for me. Every dagger mattered.

As Ryuto readied his sword, Aoi nocked an arrow but didn’t raise her bow—she kept it pointed at the ground. Ryuto was prepared to attack, but Aoi still needed to draw her bow. Starting in a battle-ready stance was meant to somewhat make up for the handicap of using a sword against a bow. In a real battle, though, it wouldn’t really matter—with Ryuto’s physical abilities, he could easily close the distance between the two of them before she could even draw back her bowstring. These rules had most likely been made with magic tools in mind.

“Begin!” Maria said.

Ryuto immediately dashed at Aoi. He was fast, so fast that it was doubtful whether Aoi would have a chance to even fire a single shot. She had two choices: either get as far away from him as possible, or shoot an arrow at him before he could get within range of her.

“Barrier!” Aoi jumped in the air, creating barriers that she began to climb like her own personal staircase. *Wait, she can do that?* If she was able to use her barriers like that, it meant she was probably able to move freely through the air.

As for Ryuto, he could jump pretty high, but not *that* high. There was absolutely no way for him to close that distance. *Whatcha gonna do, Ryuto?* My eyes raised, seeing a magic circle behind his back.

“Flare!” A blinding light filled the training grounds, and everyone in the area, including Aoi, shut their eyes.

Tamaki, who’d been hanging on to the fence while spectating, was writhing around on the floor. Flare was a spell developed by the first heroes, and Ryuto had hidden it behind his back until it was ready to go off. *Clever.* Perhaps he’d anticipated that she’d flee into the sky, or maybe he was just covering all possible outcomes.

Aoi lost her footing and fell. Apparently, she needed to concentrate in order to maintain her barriers. *Yeah, I can see all of this even after getting hit by Flare.* One might’ve thought that having an eye which specialized in all forms of vision would be weak to having a strong light flashed in it, but even through the blinding light, I was able to see. *Crazy, right?* Still, it’d be weird if I was the only one who didn’t have his eyes closed, so I followed suit and observed the battle through my eyelids instead.

“Force-Absorbing Barrier, Healing Barrier, Light Resistance Barrier!” Right as she was about to hit the ground, Aoi cast a barrier to soften her fall, a barrier which would heal minor wounds as well as her eyes…and then, on top of all that, she cast a barrier that kinda acted like sunglasses. She activated all of these almost simultaneously, then immediately proceeded to put more distance between her and Ryuto.

By the time her vision had recovered, however, Ryuto was already in range to attack. Without the chance to escape into the air again, she had no choice but to block his swing with a defensive barrier.

Archers weren’t exactly doomed in close-range combat. I’d even heard that bows were once used specifically in such scenarios. However, Aoi’s bow was not that kind of bow. She had one that suited her abilities—in other words, a longbow. There was no way she could use this bow to fend him off. Plus, Ryuto’s sword skills were first class. She could only do so much to block his attacks.

“Go, Aoi! Get him!” Tamaki’s eyes had apparently recovered, and she’d gone back to fervently cheering. She was so into it that she was almost leaning right over the fence. At this rate, she’d flip right over it. *She just*

doesn't learn, does she? There was no telling when Ryuto would use Flare again either.

"Hm? What's wrong?" Sensei asked, rubbing her eyes.

It's the climax... Uh, I mean, how should I know? I can't see either. I decided to ignore her and watched as Ryuto landed a clean blow to Aoi's waist, knocking her off her feet.

"Match over! Ryuto wins...right?" Maria looked at the captain for approval. This only made sense, given that Maria had also been blinded.

"Indeed. It's Ryuto's victory. He avoided being hit by an arrow even once. His movements were rather skillful."

Oh? It seemed as if the captain fully grasped what had happened. I guess I shouldn't have been too surprised—it was the captain, after all.

"Squee! Ryuto!" The tsundere princess's squeals were insufferable.

Ryuto chuckled nervously at the captain's praise and the tsundere princess's cheers. He walked over to Aoi and offered his hand. "You okay, Aoi?"

"Yeah… You really are strong."

"Well, my strategy worked out this time."

Really good sportsmanship. It made me feel a little better about the certain-death situation I was about to find myself in. Was this the excitement of being a warrior? I felt weirdly sweaty.

"All right! I'm gonna reach the finals and get revenge for Aoi."

"'Revenge'?" Ryuto smiled dryly at Tamaki, who was getting fired up, slicing at the air with her staff.

Um, that's not how magic staffs are used. They aren't supposed to make heavy whooshing noises as they're swung through the air. God, I'm scared!

She was using a training staff, which had weaker magic amplifiers. However, it could still function very well as a blunt instrument. Tamaki was also a Jo Master, meaning she was proficient with a staff. If she hit me with it, it'd be like a bodybuilder smacking me with a club. If that was how it was gonna be, I'd much rather have been hit by magic.

"Let's begin the next match. You two—to your starting positions."

The white lines started to look like the backdrop for my execution. At this point I was thinking about just giving up, but I couldn't do that—not with the captain staring daggers at me. *Why are you paying so much attention to me?!* The overwhelming fear was making me dizzy and my head throbbed… Oh wait, no. That was just from being in direct sunlight.

"Don't worry—I won't use my magic. It'll be a handicap."

No, please *use your magic. I'm begging you! I don't want to die.* Still, since it was part of the rules, I readied my dagger. The match wouldn't start without that. As tempted as I was to delay the start of the match, I couldn't ignore the look the captain was giving me.

"Begin!" Maria said, heralding the start of my execution.

Well, now that I was here, I might as well give it a shot. Taking even one hit from her meant certain death, so I needed to do everything I could to

buy time and avoid them. After enough time had passed, I'd yield. *A great plan by me!* I had six daggers. There was no way I'd win by using them in melee combat, so my only choice was to throw them. Six daggers gave me a whopping six shots. *Yeesh, that's like nothing.*

As soon as Maria gave the signal, Tamaki ferociously charged at me. Aren't you supposed to be a mage?! Why is your first instinct to charge? Where are you getting the energy for that?!

There was nothing I could do if she got close to me, so my only option was to distance myself. *Déjà vu?* It was just like the last match, but the difference in our speeds was completely different. Even if I tried to back away, she was fast enough that she'd close the distance almost immediately. I doubted that Tamaki had any tricks up her sleeve like Ryuto did, though. Most likely, all she was doing was running at me.

Let's be a little tricky, then. I'd learned a few little moves from my training. Even though she was still a ways off, I threw a dagger at her. At once, she deflected it with her staff. It didn't slow her down even a little.

But a few seconds later, she *did* stop in her tracks. A dagger had fallen to the ground right in front of her. Of course, I'd thrown that one as well. I was pretty annoyed that it had missed. I'd thrown it at the same time as the other knife, but upwards, so that it would fall onto her. With her level of physical sturdiness, the damage it'd do would be nothing to worry about, but given the rules of our mock battle, Tamaki had no choice but to dodge. I took this opportunity to put more distance between us.

"Not bad," Tamaki commented.

"Just a little sleight of hand. And for my next trick…" I pulled out four daggers. "I'm gonna do this twice more. Can you close the distance between us before you get hit?"

"Hmph. What if I mix it up? Still think you can hit me?"

She's not wrong. The only reason that had almost worked was because she'd run straight at me. If she started zigzagging, I had no hope of predicting her exact position. However, I could still predict her movements to some degree.

"Easily."

Falling for my taunt, Tamaki began to run at me again. Entirely on purpose, I allowed her to watch me flinging three knives into the air.

"What…?"

I readied myself to throw the last one. If she continued to run, I'd target that spot. As for the other three knives, they covered a large enough area that there was a chance at least one of them would hit her. I intended to throw the last knife right before one of the three others hit her.

I made it look like I was running back my strategy, but really, I was forcing her into making one of two decisions. If she tried to dodge the three knives, I'd get her with the knife in my hand. Tamaki didn't have the dexterity to block a knife without seeing it coming. If she focused on the

knife in my hand, though, there was a chance that she'd get hit by one of the knives I'd thrown. *So what's it gonna be?*

Actually, I probably should've just done this from the start. If I had while I still had six knives, I would've been able to throw five while holding on to one. She would've been less guarded too, which would've raised the chances of her being hit. To be honest, though, I wasn't sure if a knife falling on her head would count as a lethal blow. If anything, it seemed pretty likely that it wouldn't. If so, then maybe it was good that I hadn't wasted all my knives at the start, or else I'd be left without any options. Anyway, I wasn't trying to win here. I just wanted to buy enough time that I could yield.

"Body Fortification."

What? Tamaki's physical abilities heightened, raising her speed by one level. The original trajectory of my knives had now been rendered useless. Wait, what happened to not using magic? Oh, wait—she said she wouldn't attack me with magic. But she didn't say anything about using magic to fortify her body. She got me. Not bad.

"I..." I began to speak in an attempt to yield, but my mouth wasn't as fast as my body. "...yi..." She'd come within range of me and had begun to swing her staff. *Hang on a moment. You're not planning to hit me while your strength is magically fortified, are you?* Taking an attack from a magically fortified body was probably exactly the same as getting hit by magic in general. *Am I going to have time to surrender?* "...el..." Her staff came down towards me. I immediately threw my last dagger into the trajectory of her staff, and tried to soften the blow with my arm. She shattered the training dagger easily and got past my arm, the staff landing firmly on my head before I could finish my sentence. The last thing I heard was a loud whack.

I felt someone rubbing my head gently. My head was tingling, but my consciousness was starting to return to me. I opened my eyes.

"Have you awoken, Inori?"

Sensei's face came into focus, and all at once, I began to remember a lot of things. Tamaki had knocked me out with her staff. It was a miracle that I'd only lost consciousness. Maybe the dagger I'd thrown as well as my arm had saved me from an actual fatal blow.

Apparently, Sensei had used healing magic on me, which is why the pain I felt had been reduced to a tingle. Also, judging by the angle she seemed to be at...could my head possibly be on her lap? No way, though, right? The sensation against my head was hard, not soft. Most likely, it was just a bench or something and Sensei was sitting next to me. My eyes met hers, and I tried to raise my head towards her as a test. Unfortunately, right as I did that, she moved away. *Dammit.*

"Yes?"

"Nothing. It's just uncomfortable sleeping on something hard."

"Spare me your embarrassing antics. Shall I prepare you a pillow?"

“Forget it. I can get up.”

“Uh-huh.”

I still felt a dull pain, but it wasn’t really much different than the headache I had while in the sun. The only difference was that one disappeared when night fell.

“Aegiana and I both healed you. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. How’d I look after she hit me?”

“Your neck was…somewhat bent.”

Well, that’s not good. I might’ve actually died there.

“Well, anyway, I’m okay now. What happened with the tournament?”

“Oh, well, about that…”

Right before she could finish that sentence, the very person who’d smacked me unconscious with a staff appeared. She should’ve been fighting Ryuto in the finals right now. What was she doing here?

“What happened to your match?”

“I beat Aoi, but…”

You beat…Aoi? What? It should’ve been her and Ryuto in the finals. But before I could think about that any more, Tamaki prostrated herself on the ground.

“I’m so sorry! Forgive me! I hit you with everything I had. I could’ve killed you!”

Wow, she’s genuinely apologizing. How about some tears too? It made sense that she felt this bad about it, though. She may have been tough on the outside, but she was purehearted, and a bigger softie than anyone…aaand that same purehearted softie had almost snapped my neck. The sight of that must’ve haunted her, especially considering she was the perpetrator.

“No need to apologize. You did me a favor. I should’ve yielded sooner instead of spending time taunting you.”

“But…”

“If you’re gonna regret it this much, you should’ve left me out of the tournament in the first place. It was so obvious this was gonna happen.” *Oh, crap, didn’t mean to say what I was thinking.*

“I’m so sorry!!!” Her forehead smacked against the ground as she once more prostrated herself.

I was starting to feel bad, so I decided to stop teasing her. But it didn’t seem like she was going to stop apologizing anytime soon. *Um, hey, somebody? Help, please?* I looked around and spotted the captain coming over.

“Okay, Inori. You’re facing Ryuto in the finals.”

“I’m…what? But Tamaki won—”

“No, she lost due to breaking the rules. She attacked an opponent who was yielding.”

Oh… The captain had recognized my surrender. “But I didn’t finish speaking.” I’d only gotten as far as saying “I yiel”.

“I understand, but…”

“I’m fine with losing. I ended up using magic, anyway,” said Tamaki, looking up from the ground.

Oh, I see. So it wasn’t meant to be a gambit. She actually hadn’t meant to use magic, but then she’d gotten caught up in the moment.

“I was kinda impressed because I thought you’d duped me. I was like, wow, Tamaki’s really grown up.”

“Me too. I’d thought you’d finally matured. I was proud.”

“Why are you two being so mean?!” Tamaki stomped her foot.

Sheesh, calm down. You’re way too emotional.

“That should be enough of a warm-up.” I looked towards the voice and saw Ryuto standing behind the white line. He was completely prepared. *It’s so obvious what’s going to happen—why is he so ready to fight me?*

“Ryuto is recognizing you in his own way.”

“Wow, I’m *so* honored.”

“So? How will you respond?” Aegiana asked, smiling at me.

As I looked back at her, I smiled brightly. “I yield.”

Not a chance in hell.

In the end, they let me surrender immediately. I’d *just* been concussed, so I wasn’t exactly in great fighting shape anyway. The captain accepted my excuse without any objections, but apparently, she planned to ramp up my muscle training. *Why, though?!* Strengthening my muscles wouldn’t stop me from getting my neck snapped.

“O-O-Okay, then, Ryuto. I…I’ll allow you to kiss me.”

Beside us, a drama was playing out. Ryuto had ended up winning the tournament, so it was time for his reward. But was it really his reward? Or was it the first princess’s?

The tsundere princess’s face turned bright red as she offered her cheek to Ryuto. He got on his knees, looked at her, then put his hand on her chin.

“Huh?” Staring straight into his eyes, the tsundere princess looked lost.

“A kiss, right?”

“O-On the cheek.”

“You never said anything about that.”

Oh, he has a point. She’d said that the person who won could kiss her, but she’d only gestured to her cheek.

“B-But…”

Ryuto moved his face closer to hers, and as he did so she became redder and redder.

“Where are you going to kiss me, then?”

“Don’t you know the answer to that already?” Ryuto asked with a charming smile.

Uh…what are we watching?

“Y-You can’t.”

“This is my reward, isn’t it? Here, close your eyes.”

As Ryuto closed in on her, the tsundere princess closed her moist eyes. Then he planted his lips on her eyelids.

“Huh?”

“Naughty girl. You shouldn’t let your guard down and let people kiss you like that. You’re not a lady yet. But I’ll give you a real kiss when you’re a proper adult.” He gave her a wink and another charming smile.

The first princess swooned. Her eyes spun, and steam blew out of her ears.

“Ew.”

“Ew…”

“Yikes…”

I, Tamaki, and Aoi voiced our disgust, in that order. Because seriously, *ew.*

Ryuto returned to us proudly, as if he’d completed his mission. “The first princess always tries to act like an adult. It’s like she’s trying to be her ideal version of a grown-up. If this keeps up, some sleazy guy is gonna come along and deceive her. I’m glad I had a chance to straighten her out. Wait, what’s wrong, you guys?”

“No, it’s just…”

“You’re really something.”

“I’m kinda impressed.”

There wasn’t much else we could say about it. Tamaki and Aoi cornered Ryuto as he stared at them, confused.

“Are you *sure* you only did that to help her grow up?”

“You aren’t into shojo manga, are you?”

“Ungh!”

High combo. That’s a lotta damage. Ryuto clutched his chest in agony. *Poor guy.* I felt as if I should help him out.

I patted him on the shoulder. “Ryuto, I think you did the right thing.”

“Inori…”

“You’re such an inspiration, you lolicon hero.”

“Aaaaaargh!”

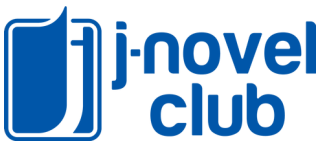
I ended up dealing the final blow, and his dying scream echoed across the training hall.

With this, the Rising Sun Kingdom’s tournament of heroes ended, and everyone lived happily ever after.

“Inori…how about that final battle?”

“How about not?”

Go and cry about it in bed, you lolicon hero.



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